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COBALT-SERIES

マリア様がみてる

薔薇のミルフィーユ

今野緒雪



Volume 21

Rose Mille-Feuille

Prologue

“Good day.”

“Good day.”

The crisp morning greeting echoes clearly through the blue sky. Today too, the maidens who gather in Maria-sama’s garden with angelic and pure smiles will pass under the tall gate. They possess both innocent minds and bodies, wrapped in a deep-colored uniform. In order that the pleats in their skirts have not been tossed into disarray, and their white sailor-collars have not been blown back, walking slowly with grace is the way here. Of course, there are no students who would shame themselves by running so as to make it in the nick of time.

This is Lillian Private Academy for Girls.

Originally established in the thirty-fourth year of the Meiji era, it is said this school was for daughters of noblemen and still exists for young women in the traditional Catholic system.

In downtown Tokyo, amid Musashino, a district where a lot of greenery can still be found, watched by God from infancy through college, this integrated elevator school is able to nurture a garden of maidens.

The name of the era has changed three times, but even on this day in the Heisei era, after eighteen years of a pure culture that a sheltered upbringing allows these women, they who seem to have been kept in a box are ready to be shipped out. Such a structure yet remains in this precious academy.

Mille-Feuille (A French layered pastry)

Without going into too much detail, the mille-feuille is a well-known pie composed of thin layers of cream or jam or fruit.

If you stab it squarely with a fork, it's crispy and collapses like a building. It is meant to be shocking, but after you softly knock it down, it's still all right to eat.

By the way, in its original language the name of the pie is spelled m i l l e f e u i l l e. When you pronounce it, it's all right in Japanese to say "mirufuuyu." But the closest pronunciation to the French for mille-feuille by far is "mirufeeyu". When written, the meaning conveyed is "a thousand women".

However, in this instance... Far from a thousand people, these are just the stories of the young ladies of three classes.

Yellow Rose Panic

The Result of 100 Battles?

Part 1.

Yes, of course.

“This coming Sunday I should be free.” Having reached the midway point through the week, she had heard this come out of Rei-chan’s mouth. She certainly had heard it. She wasn’t making this up; she’d heard it. Why was she blaming her? She had already bowed and said, “It was my fault.” Yoshino guessed she just couldn’t let it go there. It was staring her in the face; it wasn’t good enough to just turn a blind eye to it.

At that time (in other words, the time Rei-chan had been talking about going out on Sunday) Yoshino, unluckily interpreted this as “the way I WANT to spend my Sunday”. In this way, she suitably ignored her and missed an essential part of Rei-chan’s story.

She had been listening properly at first. Yanaka-san (previously Yoshino had only seen his face in passing) hadn’t visited her Uncle’s (that is, Rei-chan’s father’s) dojo for a long time. Rei-chan and her father had received an invitation to lunch together with him. She thought that was the story anyhow.

Yanaka-san is a gentle person who is never disagreeable, but an old man is a old man. Even if she’d heard that Rei-chan was eating dinner with Yanaka-ojiisan, Yoshino didn’t particularly envy her at all. She may have also mentioned that the lunch was going to be a Japanese style meal at a hotel restaurant. But that was largely her imagination. In saying that all three people would be present, in the end it probably amounted to nothing more than an enforced kendo lecture.

And then, “Making friends is important. It would be good if you could come.” It seemed like that was what she was saying. The rest of the story from this point on, Yoshino had ignored. It seemed like Rei-chan had continued on with a more detailed account, but she’d given up on listening and the information hadn’t stayed in her head at all.

Yoshino’s plans? What should she say if she’s asked? Having absentmindedly listened to only half the conversation was the cause of her nervousness.

This coming Sunday, Yoshino had made plans in secret from Rei-chan. Yeah... A secret. If discovered, somehow this secret would give her a bad reputation. She supposed it was enough to just not tell Rei-chan about it. But even if she did that, what sort of verbal deflection could she use? Something that wouldn’t necessarily be untrue...

The truth is... Yoshino had promised to spend the day out and about with Arima Nana next Sunday.

Part 2.

Yoshino had been the first to wage war.

Given that Yumi-san wasn't simply a classmate, but also her best friend, she was able to tell her, "If I become a third-year and haven't been able to get a little sister at that point, I'll make Nana my sister." With that proclamation, Arima Nana, who was in middle school, who hadn't even been a blip on the radar, leapt up to be Yoshino's tentative top little sister candidate. Emphasis on "tentative". None of the candidates from immediately following the tea party remained. The fact that at present there was no second place winner was a sad state of affairs. Apart from that... Since the Interhigh school kendo match, she had been more and more interested in Nana, but there was no helping it.

She'd checked in to her background and family situations, etc., thoroughly without Nana having noticed. Though she seemed to have rammed into her in the corridor under the civic gymnasium, with agility Nana had been able to immediately dodge. And when she'd made the request of her accomplice to uphold the lie that she hadn't just then met her, the girl had been able to carry the burden. Even though the ribbon of her uniform under her sweater had come loose, she'd been oblivious. It had only been peeking out a smidgen. There's no way she would have noticed.

But, this wasn't enough to go on. Yoshino thought that she would need to know more about Nana. It was something someone of the past used to say: "Know your enemy and know yourself, only then can you be victorious in battle". In this case, Nana probably wasn't her enemy. Operation code name: Get a Little Sister, for Yoshino, had already completely broken out into war. Her favorite phrase was, "victory goes to the one who makes the first move." For Yoshino it was always, green light means GO! In work, waiting was her number one weakness. Although it is also said, "be immovable like a mountain," this probably the slogan of someone who has great endurance.

And, now, halfway through the week, Yoshino decided to go observe Nana for the moment. However, a high school student grandly visiting a middle school classroom would be overly conspicuous. Thus, the strategy was to wait in ambush at the entranceway amongst the many comings and goings in the morning.

She gave a suitable excuse to Rei-chan and went to school a little earlier than usual. She held the stakeout nearby the student entrance to the middle school, and waited for about fifteen minutes. Gradually, the game of playing detective was growing tiresome when finally Nana came into sight.

Of course, she wasn't wearing the pink sweatshirt of the other day. She wore a school coat over her uniform. She had been crowded into a mass of middle school students, but beyond all expectations, she had been easy to find.

Yoshino moved toward Nana, walking slowly head on. First she would say, "Good day." Then she would give a beaming smile. "Thanks for the other day." She had already decided on this course of action.

Nana's face became honest and straightforward. Yes, now. "Go..." But Nana... About 1.5 meters short of Yoshino, pivoted and changed direction. Just like that she was sucked in to the school entrance. "W-wait." In confusion, Yoshino chased after her. Yet, this was the peak time for girls to enter the school—chatting and greeting each other, they flitted about. All the voices ran into each and comingled like mixed juice. In this state, it wouldn't be easy to identify anyone by the sound of their voice. (In that case...)

Yoshino put her fingers in her ears and shouted forcefully, "Tanaka-san!" A moment later a middle school student moving on the periphery stopped. (Was it magic?) It didn't seem to be. She removed her fingers from her ears. The area was engulfed in silence. Simultaneously, many students turned their attention toward her. Somehow Yoshino had managed to emit a cry on par with an emergency alert.

“I-I’m sorry. I made a disturbance.” Is this what Yumi-san had meant when she said, “To burn with embarrassment”? At any rate it had resulted in a terrible effect. She should come back here and start over later in the day. Since she had only momentarily called out, “Tanaka-san”, blessedly, Nana might not have noticed. Yet, when she tried to turn away...

“...Actually, it’s Arima.” The person in question had quite definitely noticed. It was no longer a matter of gracefully bowing out. Where is the reset button for this situation?

As they’d be a bother standing around talking while students were trying to change their shoes, the two of them stepped outside for a moment. “Umm... Hasekura Rei-sama’s...” Nana paused. They continued moving away until they were out of the flow of students. “...Honored little sister, Shimazu Yoshino. It seems you’ve already forgotten my name.”

Yoshino was able to keep her composure for the time being. Yet after having been seen in that blunder, she was not able to manufacture anything beyond that of a considerably ill-fitting upperclassman. “But I remembered yours. The incident of nearly colliding in the gymnasium, and the beautiful rosary that you dropped.”

“...” What is with that way of remembering it, Yoshino thought. Nana remembered her, because she’d continued in the habit of screwing things up with this latest episode. And then even though she couldn’t see it, she recalled the rosary before she recalled the owner.

“I was worried about it for a while. Afterwards, were you been able to tell Torii Eriko-sama anything?”

“You know Torii Eriko-sama’s name.”

“Of course.”

“Of course.”

She tried her best to put on a smile. Nana hadn't known her name, but she had known Eriko-sama's. As for being called "Hasekura Rei-sama's honored little sister", she was not amused. Despite the fact that this person might become her little sister someday, in truth, she wasn't showing a great deal of interest in Yoshino.

She must try and suppress this feeling. She... Must... Suppress it. Acting violently would leave a bad impression. That episode earlier really didn't leave a good impression. (Because she was Yoshino, Nana was only seeing her at her most ungraceful.) If she displayed any odd behavior this time, even if for only a moment, the negative image portrayed would be as upright and straight as the rolls in a hilly road.

"More importantly, was I of any help?" Nana asked. Even if she had been worried, she hadn't thought to come and ask Yoshino about it.

"I haven't thanked you enough for last week. I'm thinking I should tell you the story behind that."

"You don't need to thank me; it's fine." Nana had only to make sure their stories agreed after all.

"But it's been bugging me. So, if you can make it, this coming Sunday, won't you meet me somewhere? I'll treat to you a cake set or something." For a girl, a cake set is like the Mito Koumon's seal. With this she could settle the debt, Yoshino thought. But as to coming out to meet Nana at 8:45, she could only make a half-hearted laugh. Just as with prostrating oneself on the bare earth before an irate magistrate, it was hardly an easy thing to do.

She bowed her head for a moment as a gesture of thinking it over. "Yeah." (No way. Did she object to the cake set?) If she insisted on a high-class dinner in a restaurant... It would be totally impossible for her purse. But if she didn't make this effort, how could she realistically meet up with a middle school girl? Who in the world is this? If this was the Edo Period, she would have been a much sought-after courtesan. She shook off such a strange idea.



Yoshino asked, “Or, is Sunday inconvenient?” If there was a genuine reason for her hesitation, it probably wasn’t that she had a problem with the size of the gift.

“No, not really.”

“Then, how about we say at the ticket gate on the first floor of K station at half-past ten?” Nana still hadn’t come out and said either, “I’ll go,” or “I won’t go,” but Yoshino forcibly hastened the conversation. If she seemed indecisive, it was all the more possible to push and push and keep pushing to the end. Nana raised her head.

“Umm... Shimada-sama,”

“...Actually, it’s Shimazu.” It looked as if she’d broken down in the middle of a bout, but desperately recovered.

“I’m sorry, Shimazu-sama.”

“If it’s all right, please call me by first name, Yoshino.”

“Yoshino-sama? Is it spelled the same as the **Yoshino cherry tree?**” It’s okay if this girl says she really truly doesn’t know her. Yet, Yoshino was emotionally a bit moved. You could call it intense self-consciousness. Inside the high school, there was no mistake that Yoshino fell under the heading “wonderful famous person”. Yet, this girl didn’t know her. Her head felt numb.

“‘Yoshi’ is the same as the second kanji in freedom, ‘no’ is the same as the ‘no’ in **Wakanohana.**”

When they had met in the gym, she had been called “Hasekura Rei-sama’s honored little sister”, so it seemed like she had only vaguely known who she was. But then, could it be that she doesn’t yet know that the two of them are cousins by blood? What a pleasant surprise then. But then, she didn’t know all that much about Nana, or her relations.

“If you have any contact information you could exchange, please go ahead. Maybe something like your class... Or home number...” On her memoranda pad in her student notebook, Yoshino wrote down her name, class and home telephone number. She carefully tore it off and handed it to Nana.

“Ahh. The “no” is like the “no” in General Nogi...” The Wakanohara reference didn’t ring any bells for Nana. It appears she’s not very knowledgeable about Sumo Wrestling. Though, how did she come up with General Nogi? For a middle school student, she had an aura of refinement.

“Well then,” their business was finished. Just looking at each other silently for a time felt somewhat strange. Yoshino decided to turn back toward the high school entrance.

The public’s gaze was also tense. While it may be true that she had been talking with Yoshino, no way was a middle school student being considered for Rosa Foetida en bouton. In reality, there probably wasn’t anyone with that good of an intuition. Even though she was able to take one step forward with effort, it wouldn’t do to have such a strange rumor come to nothing. Besides, in only having overstayed her visit a little, she had given Nana the opportunity to change her mind. If Sunday’s appointment (which she took great pains to create) is refused, it will all have been for nothing.

“I look forward to it.” While saying this, Nana did not have the face of one so expectant. Yet, just before Yoshino turned on her heel, a small right hand waved to her. It was unexpectedly cute. (Ahh. With this, the secrets kept from Rei-chan are multiplying).

While walking back, Yoshino reflected. She hadn’t spoken to Rei-chan about Nana at all. For that matter, she didn’t even know the character “na” in Nana’s name.

Although I understand this is bad, I don’t know how best to confess. On this matter she’d been silent for a long time. No, she couldn’t have spoken up. She wasn’t sure if Rei-chan had learned of it. If so, had it come from Eriko-sama or Yumi-san? (That’s...)

Before it was allowed to come to such a state, she definitely decided that report would come from her own mouth. When you consider the shock that Rei-chan will surely receive... The sooner she's able to confess about Nana, the better. But, how on Earth was she going to describe her? This third-year in middle school was able to make their stories agree and deceived Eriko-sama. However in order to explain that, she must first explain all the particulars about what had transpired with Eriko-sama.

She was the little sister of Tanaka (the eldest daughter) and Tanaka (the second daughter) whom Rei-chan had competed against in the inter-high school match last year and again this year. Though, for some unspecified reason her last name was Arima. Since for some reason it's a nerve-wrecking situation, next year Yoshino might make this girl her little sister. Nevertheless, this girl seemed wholly indifferent about Yoshino. Even if it was something that was easy to explain, what could she really say? Her information in regards to Nana was sloppy at best. Even for herself, Yoshino couldn't put these things in order. If for no other reason than this, she wanted another meeting between the two of them. And then, when she herself had a reasonably enough grasp on it, she'd be able to convey her feelings to Rei-chan.

No matter if she could continue to make progress as is, or was forced to start over anew, it would still be better than the current foggy situation.

It had been the night before that Rei-chan had asked if she wanted to join them for lunch with Yanaka-san on Sunday. Yet, because of all that, Yoshino had completely ignored the finer points of Rei-chan's story.

Panic Attack!

Part 1.

Sunday morning: a bit before 10 o'clock. Yoshino, who had almost completed her preparations for going, heard the sound of a car pulling up in front of her home. (Is that a package delivery service?) But given that it wasn't a truck she'd heard... When she casually looked outside through the second story window, a black limousine was stopped there. (Ugh. What is this?)

In the blink of an eye, the driver had gotten out of the car and pushed the intercom button. DING-DONG. Although it rang a ways off, she could still hear it; that intercom didn't go to the Shimazu residence. The driver had business elsewhere. Simply put, this was a duplex house. In addition to the Shimazu family, at this time, the Hasekura household shared this building.

"Father, Mother. That was Rei-chan's house just now..." Yoshino said while noisily descending the stairs. Her parents were relaxing in the living room. As she observed this, she tried to convey to them what she had just seen.

"Ah, that's right. As expected, Yanaka-san is definitely being considerate," her mother said while sipping tea. She nodded understanding.

"What? Sending a limousine is being considerate?" At which point, her father looked up from the Sunday edition of the newspaper and said something totally irrelevant.

"Maybe Yoshino doesn't know but, Yanaka-ojiisan is considered to be wealthy. He was probably able to call in a favor for the hired car." So it seems. Indeed, since she hadn't met Yanaka-san before, she didn't realize he was rich. In appearance he was a non-descript ordinary old man. Ignoring this for the time being...

"Mother, did you say he was being considerate to her just now?" Letting the matter of Father's judgment go unsettled, Yoshino decided to instead focus on Mother's question.

“Yes, I did.”

“Why is Yanaka-ojiisan is attending to Rei-chan and Uncle like that?”

“He’s going to ask Rei-chan for a big favor... Probably.”

“A big favor... Huh? Like what?” Why was she avoiding the real issue? Yoshino shook her mother’s shoulders.

“Hey! Settle down. You haven’t heard? Why did you wait until this late hour?” Her mother asked while being severely shaken.

“I haven’t heard, what?” Yoshino let go of her mother’s shoulders and asked. What’s going on?

“Rei-chan told you about her plans for today. That was probably on Wednesday or Thursday night.” Her poor daughter’s shaking her in order to make her remember, had caused her mother to lose her memory. With all her might, she tried to explain.

“You sat next to Rei-chan in this sofa. I was walking back and forth, in and out of the room, so I missed some parts. But even still, I understood her perfectly.”

“It’s a relief that you were able to remember.” Yoshino showed the palms of her hands to her mother, making an “it’s all right” gesture. She had been sitting next to Rei-chan on this sofa. And then, Rei-chan had spoken... This Sunday, Yanaka-san was going to be treating her to lunch. That was as much as she’d heard.

From there, how had a black limo come to be involved? That had definitely not been covered. And this point about “asking Rei-chan for a big favor”? When asked if she wanted to join them in eating lunch together, had she said it would be impossible? When Yanaka-ojiisan-san got into a deep conversation, it would drag on indefinitely. And anyway, at the time it had seemed like that person would be eating lunch at Rei-chan’s house. Still, if he was a close relation, then dining out was harmless, right?

Would this favor keep Rei-chan absent home from school? She remembered that it meant Rei-chan had been forced to cancel a previous appointment. Though she hadn't heard about any specific arrangements.

Given that he had been the one to make the invitation, likely Yanaka-san would be footing the bill. Why in the world hadn't Rei-chan's refused?

"...Yoshino." Her mother and father exchanged glances. Then they looked at Yoshino dubiously.

"Is it true that you really don't know, or..."

"I really don't know." Rather, she had failed to hear it. It seemed that only the essential keywords had been completely missed. While staring at their only daughter with an expression of pity, the Shimazu parents spoke.

"Today Rei-chan is having an Omiai..." Was stated.

Part 2.

“O-Omiae!?” With the cry of a single word, she chose that moment to dash out of the house. Too late, Rei-chan and Uncle had already boarded the limousine. The driver had already started the engine and the car was pulling away.

“Rei-chan.” She tried to make the signal for them to wait. Although she ran up to the car window, waving both hands, somehow misunderstanding, Rei-chan smiled and waved her hand in return. Without any hesitation, she mouthed “I’m off” and left.

“No way...” The driver put on the blinker and the car made a left turn at the street corner. A dumbfounded Yoshino saw them off. A person softly touched her shoulder from behind.

“Yoshino-chan, were you seeing them off? Thank you.” When she turned back, Rei-chan’s mother was standing there.

“Aunt, is it true?”

“What?”

“Rei-chan, having an Omiae...” Catching up with Rei-chan and Uncle and being able to ask them about it had failed. At this point she had no choice but to ask this person. To say that these were two people who lived together and who set out together as a family, even though they were intimately close, she was really only one of Yoshino’s relatives.

“Nah, calling it an “Omiae” would be an exaggeration.”

Her aunt burst into laughter. “It’s only, Yanaka-san’s son likes Rei so they’re going to talk. Tanaka-san wants to introduce Rei’s father so they can become acquainted as well. That’s what it seems like he said. And then, it turned into a meal and a talk. That son, he will be busy for a while next week, so it was suddenly decided that they would do it today.”

There was no question: this wasn’t being called an Omiae. Yoshino clenched her fist and strained. “I wonder what he liked specifically about Rei?” Even though, outwardly she looks like a boy. While she was speaking, Aunt had the expression of not being as dissatisfied as she would have Yoshino believe.

“But that means... Where has he seen her before? And what was it he liked about her?” while gnashing her molars, Yoshino was able to ask. For the moment, meltdown was averted. For the time being, she must try and calmly collect information.

“It seems he came and saw the inter-high school tournament the other day. That was when he noticed.”

“But you know, Yanaka’s son: wouldn’t he and Rei-chan be separated in age? It’s okay, isn’t it, Aunt? He and Rei-chan wouldn’t be marrying, right?”

“Calm down, Yoshino-chan. They’re just meeting; we’re not talking about marriage this soon, really. Though, due to circumstances, they had said they wanted to meet soon.” Circumstances? I don’t know what those circumstances are but... Still, for Rei-chan who is a high school student, they were having a talk like an Omiai. Yanaka-ojiisan is still a old guy. This son... Must be entreating his relatives to mediate for him because he’s a spoiled child. Surely he’s a selfish young man from a well-to-do family who knows nothing of the world.

“...How many?” Grind-Grind-Grind. Her molars resounded like a musical instrument.

“Huh?”

“The person she’s going to meet. How many years old is he?” Yoshino pressed on her aunt, but...

“I’m sorry. I haven’t heard.” Why hasn’t she heard? Yoshino hung her head. She would probably have heard the age of the person her daughter was going to meet in an Omiai. That is, if she had been a normal mother. Even though she was exhausted, there was no helping it. She changed the direction her questioning.

“Then, have you seen a picture? Oh, never mind. I don’t want to hear about it.” But that person she’s going to meet, if he had left a favorable impression on her, it felt somehow regrettable. Though she tried to block her ears momentarily, it came in just under the wire.

“It was just a snapshot, but I’ve seen one. He had refined features. His breeding is clear in his facial expression.”

Just as she suspected. The foremost thing that comes to mind when you see his face is that he’s a young man from a well-to-do family who knows nothing of the world. Somehow she was getting a bad feeling about this. Naturally, the image that came to mind was Kashiwagi-san, Sachiko-sama’s cousin.

“Rather than Yanaka-san, he takes after Yanaka-san’s wife.” Recalling the photograph, Aunt muttered heartily.

“Aunt, do you know what Yanaka-ojiisan’s wife’s face looks like?”

“Yes, because they appear together in the photograph. She was with her son.”

“She appears with him in the photograph?” This furthered the image of a selfish young man from a well-to-do family who knows nothing of the world. Did he have a complex for his mother? His negative qualities were stacking up; she couldn’t permit this. Rei-chan was too good for this guy. I don’t want to be asked, ‘what kind of man would be good?’ In that case, I would be hard-pressed to come up with an answer.

“Is he Single?”

“Of course he’s single. There’s no mistake. It seems that he loves doing sports and reading books at home, but Rei-chan is the first girl he has shown any interest in, Yanaka-ojiisan was saying.”

“Ah, is that so?” Nevertheless some middle-aged person for who this was his first love, and who might have an Oedipus complex, can he be a good partner for Rei-chan? He might be handsome, might be clever, might be gentle, might even be sexy. She was adamantly opposed to this story.

“Aunt, where’s the hotel they’re going to?” In Yoshino’s chest, a bluish-white fire began to spark and burn.

“From way back when Rei and Yoshino-chan called it the ‘The Hotel in the Forest’. But wait, Yoshino-chan? Why? Are you planning on going?”

“No way.” There is no way that could happen. She laughed.

“I only thought about it for a moment. Today I have a promise to keep with a friend.” Though her aunt only panicked momentarily, listening to Yoshino’s words, she took a breath and relaxed, feeling relieved.

“Is that right. You could say this is dressing up for you. That color, is it called a peacock green, I wonder? It’s a lovely ensemble. It really suits Yoshino-chan.”

“It’s not really dressing up.” When she said it like that, shouldn’t it be Rei-chan’s who was dressing up, she thought to herself. Though she wasn’t wearing, as one might suspect, a kimono. She had been wearing a light brown suit with a little bit of rouge. Certainly underneath she wasn’t wearing pants but a tight long skirt with a slit in the back. These were considerably womanly clothes for Rei-chan.

“I can’t delay any longer.” All the things that had needed to be heard, had been heard. Yoshino finished up her conversation.

“What time were you planning to meet? Since there’re fewer buses on Sunday, to be on the safe side, you better check and see.”

“K Station at 10:30... Ah!” Crap, it’d already turned ten o’clock.

“I’m off.” For a moment, Yoshino returned to the entryway for her bag. She changed her shoes and once more rushed outside. After putting on her sandals, she realized being empty-handed was out of the question. And speaking of being out of the question, if she, the person who made such a coercive promise, ended up being late, such a thing would be shameful.

Running to the bus stop, she caught the bus she was scheduled to get on by merely a hair’s breadth. Inside, the bus was rattling. Yoshino sat alone in a two-person seat. Almost immediately afterward, she began stamping her feet, discreetly, in impatience.

“Ugh.” Taking a breath, she remembered about Rei-chan, and became disgustingly angry again.

“What is with that?” She had told her aunt she was meeting with a friend. Although she had no intention of breaking her promise with Nana, if granted permission, she wanted to run after Rei-chan at once.

When Rei-chan had told her about today, why hadn’t she been listening properly? Although it was too late to change anything, she regretted it nevertheless.

Part 3.

At this time on a Sunday, there was a gap between buses on the route so they moved briskly. Yoshino arrived at K Station seven minutes before the appointed time. Though this shuttle bus is constantly in use, today's run was a new record for time. At the aforementioned ticket gate, the figure of Nana could already been seen waiting. She wore jeans with a cream-colored sweater and a light-brown duffle coat. Somehow, this was a very Yumi-esque appearance.

“I’m sorry for making you wait.”

“Good day.” During the less than twenty-minute jolting bus ride, her breath, which had fallen into disarray while running, had settled down. She showed little sign of her earlier surge of anger and concern about the story of Rei-chan’s Omiai. Although, there is a tendency for concerns to grow as time passes.

However, that sort of thing has nothing to do with Nana. Losing her temper over Rei-chan would be seen plainly. As she had to yet to decide if Yoshino was a wonderful upper classman, Yoshino squashed it as much as possible, acting brightly and cheerfully.

Nevertheless, Nana said, “Is something wrong?”

“Huh?”

“Oh, nothing. It must have been my imagination.”

“So it was written all over my face, huh?” Yoshino smiled wryly. Does Nana have a sharp intuition? Was she **acting like a daikon radish?**

“That’s why, I...”

“It’s not your imagination. I’m sorry. I’m useless today. Probably, even though I’m here with you my head’s in the clouds. I think it’s probably just something trivial.”

Since their initial exchanging of greeting, they hadn’t moved as much as one step from the appointed place. Only their conversation itself had proceeded.

“Is something bothering you?”

“Well... Yeah.”

“Is it something that ended badly? Or is it a progressive problem?”

“Progressive. That’s why I’m being distracted.” No matter what she looked like, she’d decided to think about Rei-chan after all. In such a state, even if she talked about it, she couldn’t be in the here and now. Even her cake wouldn’t taste good. It would be impolite to enjoy Nana’s company like this.

“So, what does Yoshino-sama want to do?” After she thought a bit, Nana asked.

“What?”

“Even though you had something bothering you, you still came here because you had a previous appointment with me?”

“Well... Yeah.” That was it, exactly. Though, when it’s pointed out by the company she’d made the arrangement with, wasn’t that more or less like an admission of guilt? It was complicated.

“Therefore, if you broke off the engagement, and Yoshino-sama hadn’t come here, where on earth would you be right now?” Yoshino inwardly repeated Nana’s question. (If I broke the engagement, where on earth would I be right now...”)

“I think I probably would have gone to that place, but...” When she was true to her feelings, sure enough, she wanted to chase after Rei-chan. In Yoshino’s having gone, probably nothing would have changed. Yet, if she had been hesitant, she would have wanted to go to that other place quickly and learn what had happened.

“That place... What’s there? The place where your worries fester, it’s not at home, is it?”

“It’s a certain hotel in the metro area.” To this, Nana nodded.

“I understand. Let’s go.”

“Wha-?” In this hasty decision, Yoshino was bewildered.

“But that’s where Yoshino-sama wants to go, right?”

“That’s true, I want to go, but, Nana... You’ll come?” Please come. Or rather, let’s go. Even still, when she put it like that... I can’t ask that.

“Of course, I’m offering. Or, would it be an intrusion?”

“No... It’s not that.” But, is necessary that she accompany her? She needed to confirm this.

“Umm... Even if I cancel the engagement with you and you come along to the hotel, it does seem like I need to accept your hospitality in coming.” That Yoshino would feel a great deal of concern about Rei-chan’s Omiai, there was no helping it. Though, putting off worrying about until she got to the hotel is sound logic. In this case, wouldn’t Nana be a complete outsider? Or wouldn’t she also be opposed to Rei-chan’s Omiai? No, Yoshino hadn’t given a detailed enough account yet.

“Perhaps Yoshino-sama is teasing to me?” Nana’s eyes became cloudy.

“Why do you think that?”

“Or... Is this a kind of hazing?”

“That’s... Hello, Earth to Arima Nana-san. I have no idea what you’re going on about.”

She hadn’t explained in a way Yoshino could understand. Is it popular for students in middle school to talk like they’re speaking in riddles?

“To be stirred up like this, I feel left out of the loop. But you’re speaking like you’re rejecting me, it’s awful.”

“What? Stirred up?”

“Can’t you see?”

“See what?” Though she might say, “Can you see?” Or “Can’t you see it?” if she could only answer by selection an option, “I can’t see.” would get her vote.

“Anyway, I’m not going home. I’ve decided to spend the day with Yoshino-sama. No matter where we go, we’re sticking together.”

No matter where we go, we're sticking together. If with this she could be resolved in choosing a cute little sister to be in her life, how happy she would be. But, in reality... Nana was still an underclassman she was just getting acquainted with.

"Even though you don't know what's going on, you'll still go?"

"I'll ask you about it on the way. Anyway, let's buy our tickets." Nana took Yoshino's arm and turned to face the ticket vending machines. It seemed like she was gradually powering-up.

"Umm... Tickets..." Although she opened the mouth of her purse for the moment, how much would she need to deposit, and which button did she need to press? She didn't immediately have a way to discern that. But, there's no helping that, is there? Until just now she had thought her feelings about wanting to go impertinent. Previously she hadn't even been able consider it. However, she was rapidly putting those thoughts aside—here was a person who had made her wish of going there concrete.

"Come on, hold it together. To go to that hotel, which tickets do we need to buy to get to which station?" This was quite an unexpected development.

The Bout's Whereabouts

Part 1.

They had to change trains twice to get to the “Hotel in the Forest”. Although in actuality it had a proper title. As both the Hasekura and Shimazu households habitually used this hotel, their infant daughters, from its outward appearance, gave it the familiar name “Hotel in the Forest”. Having been built inside a very wooded area, the building reminds you of a deep forest.

When they arrived at the nearest station, Yoshino hesitated. Though she'd made the decision to come without giving it anymore thought, right from the start, the route seemed vague. Hadn't it been around this area, near the station? It was somewhere nearby.

When one is lost, isn't it best to ask a kind soul for directions? In truth, Yoshino still couldn't recall the official name of the hotel. It was on the tip of her tongue, but she just couldn't remember. What in the world was the name of the “Hotel in the Forest”?

“I think it's probably across from the station.” Exiting the ticket gates at the station, she spun in a circle and surveyed her surroundings. Even though she had remembered this station vividly, the hotel was completely missing from the vicinity. More often she had come by way of a private car, but when she had come by train, she'd definitely got off here.

She'd got off... And then what? She couldn't remember if she'd walked or road the rest of the way when she'd come with her parents. For Yoshino, who'd been constantly sick, when on the go there hadn't been the opportunity for her to take a close look at her surroundings, or the place she was staying.

“That's right. It seemed like we took a taxi.” Yoshino caught sight of a payphone and rushed over. Seizing the telephone book, she flipped to the hotel page. If she checked the names one-by-one, eventually she'd arrive at the correct one. However, in a word, there were MANY hotels. At the very least, could she remember the first character? Generally it's fairly easy once you know which district to look in.

“You said you took a taxi. About how far did you ride?”

“I don’t remember exactly but, about ten minutes maybe.”

“Ten minutes... I understand. Please continue your investigation.” After saying this, she was silent. Around three minutes later, she looked over her shoulder, “What are you doing?” Yoshino asked, but Nana wasn’t standing there. Nana seemed to have vanished without a trace. Just then she returned—she felt her there somewhere, walking toward her.

“At that bus stop, there’ll be a shuttle bus that passes nearby to the hotel. Let’s take it.”

“How did you find out?”

“I looked it up. It’s somewhere you can get to from this station by car in around ten minutes. And it appears to be a hotel in a forest. My search was successful. A praiseworthy act if I do say so myself.”

“Where did you find such a convenient device?! ”

“That person.” Nana pointed at the police box in front of the station. When their eyes met the policeman saluted. It was a fairly analog device, and because of that, it was all the more trustworthy.

After waiting about five minutes, they boarded the bus that appeared. By the time they got off the bus at the stop in front of the hotel, it was already 11:45.

“Now then, where to?” Naturally, it’s a shuttle bus on a route, not a courtesy bus—it doesn’t transport you through the hotel premises.

“Probably this way.” From the forest-like area, simply because she could, Nana walked rapidly. “For a restaurant lunch, public seating... Probably opens around noon? Until then you would meet in the lobby. If it was early enough, you would have tea in the lounge and soon enough the shops would open. Now what was the restaurant’s name... Of course.”

“What? Of course I don’t know.”

“Probably not. You didn’t even know the name of the hotel.”

“Little by little, your manner of speech is starting to irritate me.”

“Oh, I’m sorry.”

“No, it’s okay.” It seems she didn’t mean any harm by it.

When they’d walked for about two minutes, as Nana had anticipated, the hotel entrance came into view. No mistake; it was the “Hotel in the Forest”.

“Because it’s Ojiisan’s pick, I think they’re probably having a Japanese meal.”

“Shall we inquire?” They entered. In the lobby, they seized a hotel employee and asked where the Japanese cuisine restaurant was. After this she would steel herself. To think that she would be able to rescue Rei-chan, she had foolishly allowed herself to feel elated. However...

“Wha-?” Listening to the words of the hotel employee, Yoshino became speechless. Not hearing, Nana asked again.

“Are there a lot?” That’s right. She had underestimated when she thought the hotel would have one or two Japanese restaurants, because it wouldn’t be effective to have three or four. As she didn’t count them out on her fingers, the exact number was uncertain but, roughly judging from the names recited, there were seven or eight in this hotel. Additionally, these were only the Japanese selections among the Western as well as Chinese restaurants.

Furthermore, not all were centrally located. Rather, they were distributed throughout the hotel. She took great pains to peek into and check every shop interior one-by-one.

At which point, Nana said, “Pardon me for saying so, but if it’s an Omiai is there the possibility that it’s being held in a private room? And, of course, such a private room wouldn’t be visible...”

“Yeah.”

“We should think about this. For example, since they’re accompanying an elderly person, might they have gone to a tempura shop or some such? But to avoid splattering soup on her Western-style dress, she would probably avoid going to a soba shop, wouldn’t she?”

“Even using those criteria, it’s very difficult to narrow it down to just one.”

“That’s true. Should we give up?”

“No way.”

“Well, let’s keep going until we find the right one.”

“Pursue!” She continued to drag Nana around. Unyielding Yoshino, who hated to lose, provoked in the end by sayings like, “It can’t be done...” Or “It’s probably impossible,” had completely transformed their day into a non-stop roller coaster ride.

Oh. This personality is harmful. How many times had she failed with it before now? When you think about it, Eriko-sama’s unreasonable demands gave her the chance to become acquainted with Nana. Given that it had become something of a historic pattern, wasn’t it now acceptable? Those were the kind of things Yoshino was thinking back on while searching.

“I grabbed a leaflet from that restaurant,” Nana said, finishing her task. What would you call it? This girl was nimble.

“Let’s sit in those chairs for a moment and rethink our strategy.” Hey, wait! Since when had Nana taken the leadership role?

“Yoshino-sama?”

“Ah, yes.” Her idea so far hadn’t panned out, so Nana’s plan might be worth investigating. For the moment she’d pointed to a chair and decided to sit down.

“Let’s look at our original plan. First we exclude any non-Japanese-style restaurants, and from there, skipping any tempura or soba shops...” Nana crossed these off the list with a ballpoint pen, one by one. She referenced the photographs or takeout menus. With the exception of the tempura and soba shops, “These don’t feel like the kinds of places you’d go for an Omiai.” She eliminated them with a single stroke. So then, the remaining candidates were...

“...These three.”

“Three.” The two of them looked at each other. Taking one store to a person, there weren’t enough people to stakeout all the entrances and exits to those shops.

“What should we do?” Throwing one out, the stakes were 2 out of 3 in their favor. Or...

“For the moment, let’s go out in front of the shops,” Yoshino made this determination. It was necessary for her to appear the senior, if only a little.

“Together?” Nana inquired.

“Together.” She wasn’t carrying a cell phone. In case they got separated, contacting one another would be problematic. As they were going out in front of these shops on the main thorough-fair amid the comings and goings of many guests in a spacious hotel, if such a thing should occur, the results wouldn’t be rosy.

As they were Japanese cuisine restaurants in a hotel, occasionally the figure of a guest would block their view. For an Omiai, the shop one might visit would probably be the one that seems the most formal. As that’s the one that always has a maitre d’ standing at a reception desk, when a guest would mistakenly draw too near “Welcome” would be announced. Indeed, even for a noontime meal, it would be difficult to approach that shop for anyone other than a child. Speaking of which, when she considered the contents of her purse, **there was no way in hell that they would be admitted.**

“Lunch is probably ending in about an hour. Even if we were to grab them on their way out, we should still have time,” Nana said, while checking the clock. Yoshino also looked at her wristwatch. 12:32. For argument’s sake, let’s say mealtime runs for one hour. There shouldn’t be a change in the status quo for another thirty minutes.

“Well then, let’s go to the lounge.”

“Huh?”

“There’s no way this is going to be a traditional Japanese meal brought in courses, but I’ll treat you to a sandwich.” Yoshino proposed, in appreciation of their stepping out. Actually, they had been taking turns for a while now: their stomachs ringing with a growl. As a matter of courtesy, they both behaved as if they didn’t notice.

“This is only on my discretion; you don’t need to be rewarded.” After this obstinate report from Yoshino, Nana declined.

“Well,” and she continued, “Please treat me to cake.”

“Huh?” a sandwich was unnecessary, but she wants cake? When Yoshino starred at her in wonder, Nana laughed.

“You promised to treat me to cake today.”

“I did, didn’t I?” Yoshino also laughed. Whatever, it was a meal.

Part 2.

Although the lounge was somewhat crowded during lunchtime, since they were only a party of two they were somehow able to be seated.

For cake there was a choice among three varieties on the “Today’s Cake” menu. Yoshino asked for the crème brûlée, Nana asked for the strawberry mille-feuille. There wasn’t a cake set, so they added on their drinks, and this rounded out their order. Seeing as Nana had selected herbal tea, Yoshino also ordered it. Why did she do that? In analysis, she thought it makes you look more grownup to order herbal tea rather than milk tea. “Grownup” was above their actual age, and it wasn’t necessary to put on airs, but she noticed nevertheless. All this was after the order had been communicated.

Were these people attending a wedding ceremony? A group dressed in **dark formal embroidered kimono** and **long-sleeved showy kimono**, passed along the side of the lounge. Today was Sunday—any number of wedding receptions might be held today. While she was thinking this, their cake and herbal tea arrived.

“Was Hasekura Rei-sama wearing a kimono?”

“No, a suit.”

“Oh really? That’s good.” What about it did she think was good? Yoshino poured the herbal tea from a pot into cups. It was a mint and some other leaf combination. A tooth paste-like smell hit her nostrils sharply for a moment. After taking a deep breath, Yoshino nodded.

“It’s good, isn’t it?” Somehow or other, she thought it had been the right choice to request herbal tea. Nana skillfully and beautifully ate her mille-feuille with a fork. Because she was so dexterous at eating, Yoshino inadvertently watched her admiringly.

“Yes?” The glance had been noticed and Nana looked up.

“Ahh. Rei-chan loves mille-feuille or pie. And because she loves it, she innocently asks, ‘should we have some’. The crispy crust gets stuck in her clothes and in her hair without her noticing. And then, I don’t tell her about it right away. Afterwards, she walks through town without ever noticing. When you take your time like this, there’s no cause for panic.” Yoshino suddenly noticed she’d been chatting away up until that point. In no time she had become comfortable with Nana. As with Rei-chan, Nana was made to listen endlessly to pointless babble.

“Oh, I’m sorry.” In order to smooth it over, she poked the toffee surface of the crème brûlée with a spoon. When she had told this story to Tanuma Chisato before, it hadn’t been a criticism of Rei-chan.

“No, it’s fine.” Nana really hadn’t minded. However, Yoshino was thinking a tendency to babble isn’t necessarily that great. In the example of Tanuma Chisato... That person had been irritating, but she couldn’t say her pulse had been raised.

“You’re really close as sisters, aren’t you?”

“We were both the only child in our families. Naturally we grew to be like real sisters.

Nana nodded and said, “I see.”

Yoshino tried asking, “What is it like to have a real sister?”

“Ah, well. For me, since I don’t have a female cousin, I can’t articulate the difference. My family situation is a little bit unique.” Although Nana was the fourth daughter born to the Tanaka family, as she had become the adopted daughter of the grandfather who lived with them, she was now known as Arima-san. One could say this was unique, and it definitely was but, the environment she’d lived in since she was an infant hadn’t changed. “Even in a house with brothers, I don’t think you’d call this the norm. There’s a one-on-one relationship between the various personalities, so our method of sparring is also quite different. I have three real older sisters and we each behave differently towards each other.”

“Is that so?”

“Yes.”

After that Nana described the personalities of her elder sisters one-by-one. She had recently met with the second and third daughters of the Tanaka family in the inter-high school match, so she was reminded of them. “Ah, that person,” she thought; it was interesting. Listening to Nana’s description of her elder sisters was fun. Perhaps Nana was also able to feel this way when she had listened to Yoshino talk of Rei-chan and herself.

In the midst of their charged conversation, a young waiter drew up to their table and spoke. “Excuse me. Is either of you, Oota-sama?” Of course, as they were Shimazu and Arima, they shook their heads.

“No.”

“Neither of us.”

“I’m sorry for disturbing your conversation.” The waiter politely bowed and left.

“What was that about?” she cocked her head in confusion. He immediately went to the seat of the woman behind them and made the same inquiry.

“Excuse me. Are you Oota-sama by chance?”

“Ah, yes that’s me.” And just that quickly, Oota-san was found. That question was solved for the moment. Yoshino and Nana suspended their conversation and pricked up their ears.

“You have a telephone call.” When the nature of the urgency was revealed, there was nothing to it. He wanted the “Oota-san” who was in the lounge to take a telephone call. Though, he had come from outside. Perhaps that person had given a vague description in asking for “Oota-san, a young woman”. The waiter escorted Oota-san, who was a college-aged woman, out on foot.

While watching the figure, the two of them simultaneously exclaimed, “Ah!” “If you called looking for someone, how would you know whether or not they were in this shop? It isn’t that obvious.”

“That’s right. Why didn’t we realize that before?” Yoshino grasped her fork in vexation. As the fork was not at fault, she got her just desserts by injuring the palm of her hand.

“Have you eaten your cake yet? Let’s go.” As if they were abruptly bringing a lesson to a close in class, the two of them stood up. All at once a decision had been reached regarding the three remaining shops listed in the leaflet.

Part 3.

Even though she didn't specifically make a phone call, it was the same idea. And then, even if they couldn't try all three shops, it was easy to reach a decision on the first one. Surely she would hit bingo.

However, her luck really ran out.

"Yanaka-sama has already departed a short while ago." Though it wasn't vocalized, Yoshino was taken aback with an "ugh." While of course Nana managed the news calmly...

"Do you know about how long ago they left?"

"Please wait a moment." The maitre d' temporarily withdrew into the interior of the shop.

"If we'd noticed a little bit sooner..." But saying that at this point was meaningless it had been unavoidable. Nevertheless, she couldn't stop herself from saying so. They had passed in front of this shop a little while ago. At that time, Rei-chan had still been inside. Until they went off to have cake, they could still have made it in time.

But, if you thought about it, in that they had entered the lounge to finish eating their cake and remained there, they had been able to be present at the site of where Oota-san had been called. In so doing, they had been given a hint. They recognized how basic and rudimentary it was to simply ask the host of the shop to intercede.

The shop host returned with a copy of the sales receipt, which Yoshino could not immediately understand. "The time of payment is printed as 1:03. So that was about seven or eight minutes ago. But why do you ask?"

"I have some urgent business with the person who was with Yanaka-san. It's okay. We'll try looking around." Even if they were to hang around this place, it's not likely they'd be able to obtain any new information. The two of them excused themselves and left the shop. In their hesitation, a minute or two had already passed. The

distance they might have traveled in seven or eight minutes should still be within the area they could catch up to. At least there was the likelihood that they would still be in the hotel. The meal had ended; it didn't seem likely they would have stood around nosily saying their goodbyes.

“There are other young people here...,” Nana muttered.
“Except there aren’t.”

“That’s what I was thinking!” Yoshino had also thought of that, but hadn’t voiced the opinion. The go-between always uses that same worn-out closing pitch.

“They were probably already done talking when they went into shop a little while ago.”

“But, if they had gone a little more slowly...”

“That’s true. This hotel also has a beautiful garden, so maybe after leaving the shop they went for a stroll, or...”

“Just the two of them?!” That is not permitted. Yoshino flipped her lid. She wrested the leaflet that Nana held in her hand away from her.

“Let me see that map for a second. How do you exit to the garden?”

“Wait a second. Even if you declare our destination in a word to be “the garden”, this hotel is really huge. Besides, seeing as it’s a Sunday, there might be areas that have been reserved. Randomly dashing out there would be absurd. First of all, we should go to the reception desk, and ask which areas an ordinary guest can stroll through.”

“Where would be a suitable place to have a stroll for an Omiai? Is that what you want to ask?” What a disgrace. How did it come to this?

“If it’s unpleasant, I’ll ask,” Nana hotly informed Yoshino and walked on ahead.

“Please wait, **Nana!**” She chased after Nana who quickly vanished around a corner. Yoshino ran off in that direction.

How has it already come to this? Even though she was two years Nana's senior, why was she chasing her around like she couldn't live without her? Was she already her younger sister? If Nana is to become her little sister when she enters high school, should she let everyday pass in this state until then?

She was against that sort of thing. Yoshino had wanted to be the one who walked in front. Her destiny lay in an enlightened world. She was free; where would life take her? Standing at that fulcrum, she wanted to approach life straight on and make decisions for herself.

So then, what's this? In order to chase Nana around this turning point, she must learn to bend. Nana's attitude fell in line behind Rei-chan's. Furthermore, despite her best efforts she always ended up behind. If she were a little bit quicker... She felt something like regret compound things. Yoshino's surge of anger had been building towards a peak.

That's why she thought she should move slowly through this turning point. Also an opportunity hadn't presented itself.

She mustn't run in the corridor. You shouldn't think of this as a rule for only on school grounds.

“Yoshino-sama, stop!” From the place where she had just turned the corner, Nana's voice rang out. Reflexively she threw on the brakes. Of course, her feet which had been vigorously pumping, stopped in panic.

However...

“Look out!” Sailing along with Nana's voice, a small body leapt into her path and Yoshino collided with it. In the impact, Yoshino overcompensated and fell over backwards. The other party leapt in the opposite direction of Yoshino.

It was a child, she realized at that moment. What should she do? Even though she didn't have a license, she'd caused an accident resulting in personal injury or death. Even though her hands and her butt hit the floor and she was struck soundly, all the while Yoshino was thinking about this. The child probably was injured from the impact. If he or she had died, what would she do?

Yet the child seemed to have suffered much less damage than Yoshino had thought. This was because Nana had caught the flying child. Having depleted her power reserves, Nana also fell on her butt. Nana became pinned under the child, who had sustained almost no injury.

"Are you all right?!" coming to her senses, Yoshino rushed over.

"I'm so sorry. I was in a hurry." In order to relieve the pressure on Nana, the boy stood up. He likely had been taken by surprise. For a moment, he bowed his head slightly in apology while holding his heart. One would guess him to be probably a third or fourth grader in elementary school. Was he one of the wedding attendees? He wore a very adult two-piece suit: the top independent from the bottom. He possessed the air of a small gentleman.

"No, it's okay. It was also my fault. Sorry," Yoshino said while brushing the dust off the boy's jacket.

"Even if we're both at fault, it seems like only you two ladies were hurt. That is most unfair," the boy muttered apologetically to Yoshino and Nana. Although at present, no blood had been spilled, both of them were rubbing their palms and their butts.

"It's fine. We'll be happy as long as you are able to keep safety in mind." Those were her true feelings. Though based on his age, could you really say he was at fault? If she'd said it was, for someone smaller and weaker than her, it would be damaging. Emotionally, it would be too severe.

“But girls need protection, right? That’s what Father and Mother say.” He said so with such a serious look, that Yoshino and Nana both laughed instinctively.

“When you say protection, you really only mean support, don’t you?” Nana asked. At this the young boy nodded greatly.

“I see. It’s various things.” It was honest and cute. The boy rearranged his shirt sleeves and cuffs on his own. After that, Yoshino was stared at.

“What?”

“Haven’t I met you somewhere?”

“Really? I’m sorry, I don’t really remember.” If he had been ten years older, this might have been a bad pickup line.

“It must be my imagination. Usually I’d be telling you how I know you, but I only have a hunch we’ve met somewhere. I just can’t recall.” When you meet such a cute child, you’re not likely to forget. Could it have been that they occasionally passed each other at their favorite shop? But, sharing a favorite store with an elementary student, what in the world kind of place was that?

Although the two of them were mulling it over, neither one could come up with anything. Nana couldn’t stand it anymore and spoke to the boy.

“Hey, is this all right? Weren’t you in a hurry to get someplace?”

“That’s right. Papa and the others are waiting. I better go.”

“Okay.” The next time they crossed paths, she wasn’t likely to forget, Yoshino thought. If there was ever going to be a next time; god only knows when that would be.

“Even if your Papa and the others are tired of waiting, don’t you think that’s better than you’re being injured?”

“Next time, I won’t run. I’m really sorry.”

“Me too.” With a wave of his hand, he bid them farewell. When the figure of the child turned a corner and disappeared, Yoshino faced Nana and bowed.

“I’m sorry, and thank you.” If Nana hadn’t cried out, she might not have been able to break in time. And if Nana hadn’t caught him, the boy might have been grievously injured. In spite of her being so helpful, what Nana said sounded mortifying.

“It’s all right. If you had gotten my warning quicker, you probably could have completely avoided the accident. I happened to see that child come running out of the restroom. But only until about two or three seconds before you hit each other did I realize the danger... I never follow through.”

“But, you saved me. Just like I thought, you’re nimble.”

“Just like you thought... What?”

“Downstairs in the civic gymnasium, when it looked like you and I were going to collide. Didn’t you avoid that one too?” after Yoshino finished speaking, she thought, ‘Oh.’ Nana also noticed. “Did I just dig my own grave?”

“You dug it.” After all, it’s only because Yoshino is always running without paying attention that she finds herself in these situations... Is what went unsaid.

Yet, Yoshino thought, maybe Nana doesn’t understand the implications. It was more like she was finally running, was the feeling. It used to be that she couldn’t have run so easily, even if she’d wanted to. In her mind the way her body works now makes her glad, even if she can’t stop on a dime.

“Well, that’s true. For us as well, let’s be a little more relaxed.” This wasn’t the movie “Graduation”; even if they are five or ten minutes late, it doesn’t mean that Rei-chan will be holding a wedding ceremony.

“That’s true.” There was a washroom just within her line of sight—she said she wanted to wash her hands, which had rubbed against the floor. Happily, blood had not blotted her clothes. Though, the water smarted her hands.

“Nana.” Yoshino tried once again to ask Nana who was reflected in the row of mirrors. “Why are you here?”

“That’s...” To this, Nana was tongue-tied. “Um, to be frank, I have a feeling that Yoshino-sama is angry.”

“Stop there. When you speak evasively, you know what happens, right?”

“You’re scaring me.”

“When you speak honestly, will I become angry? If you don’t speak will you suffer something scary?” While wiping her hands on her handkerchief, she lightly glared. Contrary to the words, Nana laughed.

“I’m adventurous.”

“Huh?”

“When I first heard the story, I thought perhaps it would be an inspiration.”

“Perhaps what?”

“The smell of adventure.”

“Oh, adventure,” at Yoshino’s words, Nana nodded.

“So, if there’s an answer to your question just now, it’s ‘because it’s interesting’ is what I think.”

“It’s interesting...” As if there was nothing better to say, the idea of Rei-chan’s Omiai was “interesting.” While Yoshino had single-mindedly been chasing after Rei-chan, Nana had been thinking it was interesting.

But, it was mysterious – these were not her real motives. She was also hesitant to accept companionship at face value. That was far easier to accept.

“Then, perhaps meeting at K-station, eating cake and chatting, that sort of thing sounded better than what you had previously considered doing today.”

“Probably. But that by itself wouldn’t have been as interesting.”

“Really?”

“Yes. Because Yoshino-sama more than exceeded my expectations in being interesting.”

“Interesting...” There it was again. For Nana something was either interesting, or it was not. When it came to deciding on a course of action, this appeared to be of great consequence.

“I understand. Well then, let’s make it even more interesting.” Since the Nana in the mirror definitely looked pleased, Yoshino decided to mount this “adventure” with her.

Part 4.

To say this was not an adventure story might be understating it. In order to return the princess (Rei-chan) who was swept away by an evil demon safely to this world, you must go, brave Yoshino, with attendant Nana.

In order to pull herself together, and bring the story to a climax: at the gates of hell (the front desk), she asked the guardsman (information lady) for the route to Beelzebub's lair (the garden). The guardsman kindly spread out the leaflet and drew on the hotel guide map. With a red pen "this area" or "around here" were marked as being important locations.

Of course, with a beaming smile for the two of them, "The garden is beautiful—you might want to take a stroll through it. But... Did someone recommend it?" she put the question to them. The truth was they were chasing an Omiai. Though even if their mouths had burst open, there was no way they could have said such a thing.

Following the route that had been laid out for them, they had climbed down a flight of stairs and found the door that lead out to the garden, when suddenly a voice from behind called them to stop.

"Yoshino-chan?" That voice seemed to radiate both incredulous and forlorn. As Yoshino turned to look over her shoulder, she suddenly recharged to full power. "Just as I thought, it is Yoshino-chan. What are you doing here?"

There was no mistake: having lived next door to them since she was born, she'd encountered this person almost every day. She'd only spotted this person for just a moment that morning before they all ran off in the limo. It was Rei-chan's father. In addition to that, in truth, he was Yoshino's uncle.

"Uncle. Where's Rei-chan?" She ran up to him. Cutting through the entire greeting she pressed on him. She should have brought her magic wand (shinai) for her uncle: he was scary and not grinning.

“Would you look at that. Yoshino-chan, you seem to be in high spirits.” The person standing next to her uncle burst into laughter. “What’s wrong?! Do you need Rei-chan for something?!” This person was the evil demon, er... Instigator of today’s Omiai: Yanaka-ojiisan.

“Ah, hello.” As she was in the middle of grilling her uncle in the spotlight, she gave a perfunctory greeting. And even if she had had the time, this seemed to be the person who had brought Rei-chan to the Omiai. It was very unlikely she would be able to muster a courteous greeting.

Yanaka-ojiisan didn’t worry on this point. He approached Nana, who was standing behind Yoshino.

“Certainly... You must be...”

“I’m Nana. Please excuse my lack of correspondence, Yanaka-sama.” Where had Rei-chan been concealed? It’s not right for you to hide her... In the middle of Yoshino’s heated dispute with her Uncle, she caught a hint of what was being said behind her back and she turned around.

Yoshino asked, “Nana, what did you just say?”

“Who is this girl?” Uncle asked.

“Has not Honored Father Hasekura met me once before? Perhaps you do not remember?” In addition to Yanaka-ojiisan, Rei-chan’s father was also being addressed as ‘honored father’ by Nana.

When his chest was finally freed from the grip of his niece, ‘Honored Father Hasekura’ concentrated on reaching back into his memory.

“Ah! From Arima-san’s place. You’ve become such a perfect lady—I didn’t immediately recognize you.”

Harrumph. Ordinarily, Uncle had such a stubborn personality. He seemed to have become flattery out of nowhere.

“But, why is Nana-chan with Yoshino-chan?” At which point, Yanaka-ojiisan who had just been reminded could recall the specifics.

“That reminds me, Arima-san said that only Nana-chan had been accepted to Lillian.”

“That’s right.” Nana nodded. “I was accepted into the same school. However, that was long before I was granted the privilege of being close friends with Yoshino-sama. We were just out spending the day together. While chatting away happily, by chance, the topic of Honored Father came up. It seems you’d come here today, right? If possible I had wanted to meet up with you again after all this time, and we ended up being uninvited guests.” So as to not lose or seem inferior to Uncle, Nana’s words were also flattering.

“That makes me happy to hear.”

“Although sensible Yoshino-sama said that because it’s bothersome we should stop, I partly coerced her.” This way of speaking was also quite skillful. She hadn’t used the keywords “Rei-chan’s Omiai” even once. Rather we had come to see our Honored Fathers. Moreover, she followed it up by painting Yoshino in a favorable light. However...

Nana’s consideration was welcome but, it would have been nice to have said this before now. After having pressed her Uncle for Rei-chan’s whereabouts, her aim had probably been revealed.

“At the moment Rei-chan is strolling with my son in the garden. See, look there. If you want to go over and see, it’s all right.” He pointed through the glass. In the spacious Japanese garden, she caught a fleeting glimpse of the back of the head of a person who seemed to be Rei-chan moving through the dense trees.

“But, wouldn’t we be interrupting?” Yoshino hesitated. When she was so honestly granted permission, she wanted to doubt it would be permitted without some kind of catch.

“My son would probably be pleased too. He seems to have been interested in Yoshino-chan.”

“Whaa... Me?” Not just in Rei-chan, but he was also interested in Yoshino. That’s unscrupulous. Then, couldn’t it be that he was just a skirt-chaser? If that’s what he was up to, there was a misunderstanding.

“Pretty soon now my son will also undergo the same operation Yoshino-chan has had.”

“On his heart?” Yoshino quietly touched that place on her chest. Yanaka-ojiisan nodded.

“Therefore, Rei-chan was worried and made the time to see him. She’s a kind daughter.”

“Y-yes... That’s true.” What? So that was it? Yoshino finally understood. It didn’t mean that Rei-chan was interested in having an Omiai. Until a year ago, Yoshino had probably looked very much like how Yanaka’s son does now. She had probably wanted to help him, if only a little, and decided to meet.

Caught up in her own fantasy, she had misunderstood. Becoming confused and giving chase... “I’m an idiot,” Yoshino thought. Rei-chan is kind. Yoshino should have known that more than anyone.

Somehow her chest felt deflated.

“Shall we stop by the garden?” Nana proposed.

“We should.” For that matter, since Yoshino was his sempai in getting through the operation, she could cheer on Yanaka’s son. If asked she wouldn’t hesitate to offer some advice.

“Oh yes, go on. Go on.” As they were being shooed out by Yanaka-ojiisan, they moved toward the sprawling fragrant forest.

“You’ve known about Yanaka-san since before we met?” While walking down the path to the garden, Yoshino asked Nana.

“When I heard Yoshino-sama ask for the reservation for “Yanaka-san” in the shop, I thought, it was probably just a coincidence, but it could be him. I wasn’t certain until we met just now.”

“Why didn’t you say anything at the time?”

“Because... I wasn’t asked.” Nana answered, aloof. Well, it was certainly true that she hadn’t asked--it’s natural that she wouldn’t have known that Nana and Yanaka-ojiisan were acquainted. Even if she had made the inference that Yanaka-san had been doing kendo as a hobby for years, being not at the level of a Sherlock Holmes or **Akechi Kogoro**, it doesn’t seem like she could have arrived at that conclusion.

A narrow road ran among the trees. From their previous position, they hadn’t been able to see Rei-chan and company at all.

“Is this really the right road?”

“Probably. From inside the hotel, we could see Rei-sama going down this path.” She had been feeling uneasy about this place, when suddenly her field of vision opened up.

“Whaa.” Nana and Yoshino both exclaimed at the same instant. The moment they exited the dusky road, they were bathed in light. Before their eyes, rays of reflected sunlight glistened off of a pond that had just now come into view.

“Wow.” She was so moved she had remained standing there for quite some time. Or at least that’s what it had seemed like. It was the kind of situation where one composes an impromptu haiku, but nothing was forthcoming.

From somewhere the sound of birds flapping their wings could be heard. At this, Yoshino returned to her senses.

“I wonder where Rei-chan is.” Even though their prospects of finding her had improved, she hadn’t been able to spot Rei-chan or her friend.

“Yoshino-sama, over there.” Nana pointed at a one-meter tall hedge. Although she had her face turned away as she was crouched down facing her companion, the figure was unmistakably Rei-chan’s. But where was Yanaka-san’s son? After searching the area, she was able to just barely detect the head of a person protruding over the hedge. Apparently, he seemed to be squatting down, doing something or other. Rei-chan was watching that person.

Since Yoshino had not heard more than simply the story of how Yanaka's son was going to have an operation, she decided to speak from the heart with a supportive serenity. As Rei-chan's cousin, a courteous greeting would certainly be behavior befitting a lady.

However, when Rei-chan's cheek in profile came into view, gradually her composure over her emotions began to slip. Why was she laughing so happily with the company Yoshino was about to meet? Could it really be out of sympathy? In short order, she flew into a spitting rage.

“Why that little...”

“Uh... Yoshino-sama?” Nana’s cautions did not reach her; Yoshino was already running toward the hedge. As she was running with full force, naturally, Rei-chan noticed her. She opened her eyes wide and stood up. Her mouth formed the word “Yoshino”.

Right about the time when Yoshino arrived on the scene, Yanaka’s son, who had been squatting turned around and said, “Huh? Yoshino-san?” Their eyes met for an instant as they momentarily confirmed the other party’s presence. Yoshino thought her astonishment must have shown on her face. Seeing about the same surprise reflected in the face of the person before her caused her to realize her own.

When Nana caught up to her and noticed him, as Yoshino might have guessed, she too was a loss for words.

“What’s going on, Yoshino?” Rei-chan asked, being the only person to differ in the type of surprise she displayed. Given that her company had just increased from being alone with Yanaka’s son to also being with Yoshino and an unknown girl who was just catching up to them, she waited patiently for someone to please explain this situation succinctly.

“Oh...” Being the first person to speak Yoshino said, “So you’re the person who was with Rei-chan.”

“So you’re Yoshino-san. I should have realized it when I first saw you. Certainly, you were in the civic gymnasium during the match, right?” There must be some kind of mistake, right? He was the boy she had just collided with a little while ago.

“Umm... Is there only the two of you?” Yoshino spun around, scanning the vicinity. Was there the possibility that someone other than Rei-chan and the boy was lurking nearby? However, no new character was popping into the story. In the spot where the boy had been squatting down just now, she was only able to make out a procession of ants. The boy had been messing with the ants just before they arrived; what appeared to be a trap was laid in the ground with a twig.

He turned and said directly to Yoshino, “Yoshino-san. I will never lose to you.”

“Wha...” For a moment she couldn’t understand what had been said to her. Just now she had been wondering where Yanaka’s son was hiding. There were too many things to be thinking about at the same time.

“Next week I’m going to be having the same operation on my heart that you had. If it’s a success, I’ll have a strong body too.”

“Wait a second...” Just now he said “operation”. But... The one having the operation was supposed to be Yanaka’s son. In other words... Was it possible?

No way!

“Which of us is better suited for Rei-san? Let’s have a bout to decide.” One mustn’t make light of an enemy just because he’s younger. “I love Rei-san.” This guy was serious.



Part 5.

“Nana, did you know?” as they rocked back and forth on the return train home, Yoshino asked.

“About what?” Nana asked in return.

“That Yanaka’s son was really that young?” Although Yoshino had called Yanaka-ojiisan “Grandpa”, and truly in appearance he was the spitting image of a grandfather. She might have guessed him to be young, but in truth he had already passed seventy. If they were talking about his son, one might speculate that he was around forty or fifty. But despite that, his son was ten years old. As it was, when you saw them walking together, they looked for all the world like a grandfather and a grandson.

“I didn’t. I hadn’t heard the whole story about the family.” After Nana said this, she muttered, “But... I had completely forgotten, but now I remember hearing from Grandfather Arima that Yanaka-ojiisan had remarried.”

“Oh, really?”

“Yes.” Being worn out from their adventure, the two fell silent. Although Yanaka-ojiisan had offered to transport them back in the hired car with Rei-chan and company, Yoshino had decided to forego that. And so now alone with Nana, the two retraced their steps.

“Oh! In the all the commotion, I forgot to introduce you to Rei-chan.”

“That’s right. Even though I’ve been waiting.” With her right hand covering her mouth, Nana gave a big yawn. Due to the train’s heat and extreme vibration, she was being lulled to sleep. Yoshino was also given to yawn.

“But when that time comes, how should I introduce you?” Even though she had tricked Eriko-sama, would this third-year middle school student cooperate to get their stories straight again? Last year and again this year, hadn’t Rei-chan fought first Tanaka-san, and then her little sister in the Inter-High School

Tournament? They both liked adventure... It's taking a leap but, since Rei-chan had the same tastes when it came to cake, wouldn't she also have a reliable opinion when it came to first impressions of sweet girls? Or...

Perhaps next year Yoshino would get a Petite Sœur.

Nana spoke, "Please tell Rei-sama that a middle school student wants to have a contest with her."

"WHAT?!" This was something she hadn't expected to hear; Yoshino instinctively looked at Nana. "A contest? You don't mean, as in... A kendo bout?"

"What else is there besides that?"

"No..." For instance, knitting or baking cakes or a Cosmos Paperback Book Speed Reading Competition... Although she enumerated such things in her head, she didn't speak them aloud because it had become futile. When Nana, the (probable) heir to the Arima Dojo, said "a bout", with the exception of kendo, what else would she have been talking about?

Speaking of which, just how advanced is Nana's true kendo ability anyway? If you assume that her plan is to get revenge for her two elder sisters, does that mean she would be using all of her skills? There were various things she wanted to ask, however...

"Please convey my intentions without fail." And so saying, she fell silent. Next to her, Nana's breathing had already slowing into the pattern of one sleeping.

"No way..." Bothered by what Nana's real intentions might be, Yoshino couldn't feel sleepy even in a place like this.

Reverie of the White Rose

Two Peaceful People

Part 1.

Just as she crossed the threshold of the school gate, a loud voice called out from one side.

“Shimako!” Emerging from the school together with Shimako, Noriko, who had not been the one that had just heard her name called, nevertheless turned in unison with Shimako.

The owner of the loud voice was immediately discovered. In a white apron, a triangle bandage, and sunglasses, which could only be called a mismatch of fashions; standing out considerably among women as a man with a close cropped haircut and a solidly built frame; a person so wicked that one is forced to skip right past conspicuous and arrive at “sinister.” Someone who appeared to be approximately thirty years of age.

“Ah...” Shimako-san muttered quietly. Somehow he didn’t appear to be a complete stranger to Shimako. Even if he had seldom spoken to her, at least the other party who had called out the name “Shimako” clearly recognized her.

“We need to talk.” This strange man rapidly closed the distance and seized Shimako-san by the arm.

“Hey, what are you doing?” Noriko interrupted the two people, panicking. Shimako-san voluntarily brushed off the hand that had been gripping her.

“Talk?”

“Yes, but I don’t want to talk about it right here... Anyway, come on, let’s go.”

“I’m going home. If you have to talk, please do it on the way. Please, won’t you come along?”

“That’s impossible. There’s no time, and even if I had the time, I can’t just nonchalantly accompany you to the house. If I was caught by the old man, my ass would be in a sling.”

“Well then, you’re on your own.” In order to show that she didn’t feel obligated, Shimako turned her back on the aproned man and began to walk away. Despite this, he followed her.

“Is it going to be okay?” Noriko was charmed by her elder sister’s decisive attitude. Although Shimako-san displayed the appearance of being a frail woman, at her core she was strong and steady.

However, Apron Man did not give up quite so easily. “I guess there’s no choice. I didn’t want to get rough, but...” He muttered to himself. From behind, he caught a hold of both of Shimako’s arms.

“KYAAA~” Shimako-san, who was having the freedom of her hands snatched away, twisted her body in resistance. Of course, at this even Noriko couldn’t keep silent.

“Take your hands off Shimako-san!” She took a hold of his apron. At which point...

“Stop it, both of you!” Shimako called out. Noriko was so surprised she literally halted all movement. Apron Man instinctively let go.

“It’s all right, Noriko.”

“Huh?” She didn’t understand what was “all right”. Slowly and deliberately Shimako turned around and spoke to Apron Man.

“Where would be a good place to go?”

“Shimako-san...” It was her intention to follow them, but she couldn’t.

“It’s all right. More importantly, I do not wish to be noisy in front of the school gate.” Shimako-san turned in a circle, surveying her surroundings. It seems they had just missed the bus’s departure. There didn’t seem to be many students left at the bus stop. She couldn’t spot sight of a security guard within the range of her vision.

However, if they managed to be noisier than this, eventually some students would probably take notice. Once outside the gate they should be able to spot a security guard or two. Shimako-san must be worried about that.

“I said it’s all right... Anyway, I’ll go home along afterwards. I’ll call you tonight.”

“Shimako-san...” In the end, Shimako-san and Apron Man rode off together in a station wagon. She had been taken somewhere. Since it was Shimako-san, if she had thought it was even the least bit dangerous, she probably would have made a ruckus and firmly refused to go. She had said, “It’s all right” so in her judgment she must have really believed it was just that.

But... What if Shimako-san was mistaken to think it’s all right? Despite the fact that Shimako-san believed in him, whether or not that aproned man was up to no good is another story entirely.

What should I do? In the end, wouldn’t it be all right to consult some trusted adult on this? That’s what she thought at the time.

“It’s probably all right,” a voice from behind her said.

“On what do you base that argument?” Noriko turned around. There she saw a noble-faced woman standing alone.

“I know who that man is.” She wore a leather jacket and jeans. From her large shoulder bag, the face of a college textbook was peeking out. She was a Lillian college student. “Should I tell you who it is?” Though once she had turned around, the woman had assumed a very suggestive pose. Noriko turned back around and began walking the other way.

“No thank you. Shimako-san will call me tonight.” The female college student didn’t follow her.

“Yes but for you, until you get that phone call, you’re going to worry endlessly. You poor thing.”

“...”

“If you were to ask me who he is, Shimako wouldn’t be mad.” Although she had been annoyed and didn’t want to lose face, Noriko turned back. In this, she was unpleasantly defeated. When she gave in, like an owner who praises a dog that returns a thrown Frisbee, she patted her head saying, “Good girl.”

“I’m terribly sorry but, actually, could we go somewhere else?” Noriko proposed.

“Huh?”

“Some place that doesn’t attract quite so much public attention.”

“Umm... Are you coming on to me?”

“Not at all. Even though Shimako-san had had consideration and taken great pains in not making a scene, if we draw undo attention to ourselves now, it would undo everything she’d fought for.”

Gradually escalating from patting her on the head and saying “good girl”, she had had her shoulder and arm stroked and now she could confidently say the woman was clinging to her back. High school students who had come out through the gate, upon seeing this, were whispering to each other surreptitiously.

“You’re right...” The college woman separated her body from Noriko for the moment. After that she said, “follow me” and began walking away.

While watching her back, Noriko thought dimly. For it to come to this isn’t the end of the world. Fifteen minutes ago, Shimako-san had said so herself.

Part 2.

“Lately, there have been times when I’m noticing more and more,” that is to say, these had been Shimako’s words. That incident had occurred only fifteen minutes ago. Two people stood side-by-side in front of Maria-sama’s statue. As one always does when passing here, they joined their hands in prayer. When there are two people, No... Even if there are multiple practitioners, in generally all cases, Noriko finishes prayer first. Shimako-san had always been the one to have her hands joined the longest. Before too long Shimako-san opened her eyes and said with a smile, “Shall we go?”

Until coming before the statue of Maria-sama, Noriko had been mentioning her plans to go on short Buddhist statue viewing pilgrimage. But putting that aside, just as soon as the two people began walking once more, Shimako-san said, “Lately, there have been times when I’m noticing more and more.”

“What’s that?” Noriko asked. From Shimako’s tone, it didn’t seem like the subject matter was going to be very serious. Yet, it also wasn’t the kind of story she would be laughing and reminiscing over.

“We’re peaceful, aren’t we?”

“Huh?”

“By we, I mean Noriko and I.”

“Peaceful...” She didn’t have time to finish gauging the meaning of what Shimako-san was saying. Noriko simply repeated what she’d heard. Peaceful.

Without a doubt, if asked, “Are the two of you peaceful?” I think a good response would be, “we’re peaceful.” No war had been born against this person. They were able to eat together every day. They were also able to study when they came to school together. Of children in all parts of the world, they were blessed with the opportunity to be in a richer environment.

However, because Shimako-san had limited this to “Noriko and I” she probably wasn’t talking about anything as grand as that. Of course, in this peace, the two participants couldn’t trade off.

“If the “us” is Shimako-san and myself, who would be an example of someone who isn’t peaceful?”

“For example, Yumi-san or Yoshino-san.”

“That would be...” Some very familiar people had been named. Yet, in having named someone concretely, she somehow understood.

“Those two are in strife just now.” While walking with a patient gait, Shimako-san nodded.

“Even so, I wonder if it’s okay if only the two of us are leading a gentle life,” was what Shimako-san said. From the same class as Shimako-san, Fukuzawa Yumi-sama and Shimazu Yoshino-sama seemed to both be mentally and physically caught up in the problem of getting a little sister.

Shimako-san, along with the others who are called Rose: Ogasawara Sachiko-sama and Hasekura Rei-sama, although they were a grade above her, must all be busying themselves in earnest with preparations for entering college. Additionally, for both the Crimson Rose and the Yellow Rose elder sisters, the great challenge of climbing the hurdle of “graduation” awaits.

However, only we who are called the White Rose sisters have nothing troublesome staring us in the face. Which, was fine by Noriko.

“Isn’t it okay?” There is almost always a problem or question which grows and grows until it threatens to suffocate you. Isn’t it okay if there is no great affair of the heart? Or so Noriko thought.

“I agree.” Although Shimako-san said so, there seemed to be some fragment of understanding she was missing. “I have a feeling that that air of tension has vanished.” Air of tension. Can’t you say with assurance that in a student’s life, an air of tension must always persist? Though, the Shimako-san of the here and now said there wasn’t any, it seemed to her that the current air of tension is simply too lax.

“In that case, my reading of it must have been wrong. What would you call it?”

“Peace at any price?”

“...Ah. What a neatly fitting word.” One could say it was fitting. Although she only allowed herself the thought, Noriko was surprised.

“Must there always be peace at any price?”

“Must there be... It’s not possible to explain very well but, for example? If this place was paradise, where’s the problem? If it was a battlefield, it wouldn’t be permitted. That’s probably the case anywhere in the world, right?”

“In other words, Shimako-san, you suggest that even when we’re surrounded by a serious atmosphere, the two of us have no such problems.”

“Right... I think.” It’s not a superior solution, but it seems pretty close.

“But,” Noriko spoke. “That’s something that can’t be helped, can it? Shimako-san doesn’t have an elder sister graduating this year, and you already have a little sister, namely me. The Crimson and Yellow Roses couldn’t help being in their situation.”

“That’s right.” Shimako-san nodded with a smile. “But you know, Sachiko-sama and Rei-sama had obtained little sisters by about this time last year. And still they weren’t feeling peace at any price.”

“Is that right?”

“Sachiko-sama’s introduction to her little sister, Yumi-san: she seems to have been feeling torn. And Rei-sama, between her kendo match and Yoshino-san, she was definitely troubled.”

Noriko didn’t know about last year. Even if she had heard it as a rumor, at the time the sense she got was of a person in upheaval. She probably hadn’t grasped its true meaning.

“Well then, Shimako-san, don’t you think it’d be okay if some scandal happened?”

“Of course, but please don’t return the rosary.” They both laughed. The Yellow Rose Revolution of late last fall, which had begun with Yoshino-sama returning Rei-sama’s rosary, had given rise to many such returned rosaries.

“I... Really for everyone, I think I want to do something. But what would be good, I’m not sure.”

Picking out a little sister or which courses to take is that girl’s responsibility alone. Although they were comrades, because she is not personally affected, for Shimako-san, surely she would be overstepping her bounds.

“After all, we were the only ones who weren’t able to help with the tea party.” Shimako-san spoke once more, looking down. “I wonder if it’s okay if we’re the only ones who can pass the time peacefully like this.” A few minutes later, because it was unexpected that anything would happen, it stood to reason she should say this.

Part 3.

Noriko was brought to the university café by the college student. She put hot coffee on the table. While clinging to Noriko, she sat down next to her and put her fingers in Noriko's ears. If Noriko didn't react, she was told the woman would be disappointed.

"Are you sexually frigid?" As a greeting, it was indescribable. Putting aside whether or not she was frigid, Noriko asked for confirmation.

"You are Satō Sei-sama, correct?"

"How did you know?" The college student, or rather Satō Sei-sama, said coolly, "even when we haven't met", throwing her head back. "I understand. It's normal." In truth, given this exchange of small talk, could she say the rumors about her had been quite true, or did she differ from the image Noriko had imagined? And yet, "Ah, this person is Satō Sei" hadn't been her only thought.

"You called Shimako-san 'Shimako'. Also, at the inter-high school tournament, you were far off but didn't you wave to us?"

"Ah, gotcha." With a pop, Sei-sama punched her palm with her fist. If you were only to say that this person was Shimako-san's elder sister, it wasn't believable. Admittedly at that time there had been a great number of people. Also, when two people are alone together, all bets are off. What had Shimako-san been feeling when they met each other?

"Pffw. To leave without giving your name. I thought, 'Who in the world was that person?' Although I'd been hoping to realize after the fact."

"I'm sorry I can't make a Yumi-san-like loud reaction."

"I guess not. She was born having that reaction. Unfortunately." Sei-sama stood up. Moving from right beside Noriko, she changed seats to be opposite her. There was no meaning to clinging to a person who isn't bothered by it. It seems she had only wanted to see Noriko's reaction.

“I’m Nijo Noriko.”

“Yes. Thank you for always taking care of Shimako. I’m Satō Sei.” Having only seen each other’s face from a distance, they had not had a proper greeting. They tentatively introduced each other and bowed.

“And?” Noriko quickly raised her head and asked. “Who was that person?”

“That person? Who?” Sei-sama asked and looked diagonally outside.

“The Apron Man! Didn’t you say you’d tell me if I asked? Or... No way, at that time were you...” Noriko leaned forward in curiosity. She seized the collar of Sei-sama’s jacket. “Were you just pulling that out of your ear? I knew it. I knew it.” After liberating herself, Sei-sama first straightened her collar. Afterwards she had reminded Noriko to have some coffee and put her elbows up on the table. Then she said, “Huh? Who does this remind me of...”

“Who?” while dropping a portion of milk into her cup, Noriko wasn’t sure who she was supposed to have been reminding her of. But anyway, who in the world was that guy? The impact made by his cooking apron was too strong—she hadn’t gotten a very good look at his face. Certainly, she didn’t know where that attitude had come from.

“Shimako’s father.”

“Oh.” She thought she might have said, “I see.” Shimako-san’s father. At that time, he’d wore his apron rather in the fashion of a pious monk wearing a stole, it reminded her of the image of Takuya-kun making a practical joke at the school festival. However, if you said that man reminded you of someone, it wasn’t Shimako-san’s father. He was far too young.

“But you see...” Sei-sama said. “That was Shimako’s elder brother.”

“WHAT?! But... Isn’t Shimako-san an only child?”

“An only child? Have you asked her specifically?” She hadn’t. Actually she couldn’t remember whether or not she had asked.

“But...”

“They’re separated in age and because they don’t live together, I wonder if that’s why he hasn’t come up in conversation.”

“Is that right?”

“It is. Also, he’s, well, an eccentric person. Though, Shimako would never speak ill of anyone. Ohh. I see. You were worried because it seems like Shimako is your beloved. Well, does that set your mind at ease?”

“Yeah.” It’s a relief but, it was a shock that Shimako-san had failed to mention that she had a brother.

“There’s no resemblance.”

“No, there isn’t.” Despite the fact that Sei-sama still had all her own coffee, she took a sip from Noriko’s cup as she spoke.

“But, without a doubt they’re blood-related.”

Part 4.

“Is he safe? Is he out?” Her brother had gotten out of the car and began to run. Rushing into the building ahead of her, he gave out a war cry, “UOHH”.

“...Out, is it?” Excusing herself and removing her shoes, Shimako also entered. This was a kindergarten building.

“Safe AND out. It’s disappeared: my masterpiece!” her brother had said. More so than a kitchen, this place gave you the feeling of being constricted. Squatting down on the crowded floor, in blank surprise he opened the lid of the oven.

He’d said repeatedly in the car that he was in the middle of baking a cake. The “safe or out” had referred to whether or not he’d scorched it black or would make it back in time to take it out. But to say that it had disappeared was...

“Masafumi-san.” A middle-aged woman who had appeared spoke her brother’s name. On the plate she held in her hand, lay the still steaming pound cake. “Because your masterpiece had been turning the color of a Kitsune (reddish-brown), I took it out. Since my oven has an old timer, please be sure to pay attention. A few minutes more and your kitsune would have become a black bear... OH!”

“How do you do. Please excuse the interruption.” Since she had been noticed, Shimako bowed her head.

“My little sister,” her brother introduced her. For some reason he omitted the purpose of her presence.

“Really? What a beautiful lady. Is she really your sister?” The woman brought her face closer to Shimako’s face and shifted her glasses so as to get a better look.

“Are you sure this isn’t a girl you’re dating who goes happens to go Lillian Girl’s School? You know, even if you’re dating, it’s still a crime.” The difference in age and the lack of a strong resemblance was to blame. For the longest time, whenever they were seen together, because there was no precedent, they had certainly experienced the reaction of someone saying ‘You two? You’re lying...’

“My name is Tōdō Shimako.” Shimako presented her student notebook. It’s possible this would be some kind of acceptable proof that she had the same “Tōdō” surname as her older brother.

“Ohh. It’s true. I’m so sorry. I’m the principal of this kindergarten. For your older brother, we’re always...”

“Oh no, I should be thanking you for always taking care of my brother.”

“Come now, it’s a give and take.” While presenting her older brother with the pound cake that lay on the plate, the kindergarten teacher laughed.

“Principal, how was the taste?” My brother asked.

“What’s this?” she cocked her head at him. Shimako listened intently from his side. “Don’t play dumb. My masterpiece, you tried it, didn’t you?”

“You’ll get a bad reputation if you accuse people baselessly.”

“Oh, then what are those crumbs around your mouth.”

“Oh... Darn.” Upon wiping her mouth, no crumbs were found. Her older brother gave Shimako a wink.

“You tricked me! You must have seen the cake was smaller than it should have been.

“Sorry.” Shimako apologized to the principal. At which point, the principal’s angry voice changed to a laugh.

“Well, I was able to entertain my guest, one way or another...” Shimako politely declined the principal’s invitation to come spend time with her in her office. The two of them stood opposite each other across the kitchen table. A kindergarten building after the kindergarteners had gone home is so quiet, you completely forget where you are. Although occasionally a faint sound can be heard emanating from somewhere. Apparently this was the sound of teachers who remained doing some work.

“I hadn’t heard that you’d gotten a job in a kindergarten...” While drinking the tea her older brother had made, Shimako wondered whether or not their parents knew about this.

“It’s not that I was looking for one. There’s a temple behind this building. It’s going through some troublesome times just now. One person is still undergoing training. The chief priest of the temple is an administrator for this kindergarten. Since they’re having a manpower shortage, I’m helping out is all.”

“And baking cakes?”

“Oh, this is just a prototype. You know how kindergartners are with midday snacks. Oh, did you know? When I was in school, I worked at a cake shop as a part-time job.”

“At a cake shop?” This was the first she’d heard of it. Shimako thought she didn’t remember this because she had probably been very young. It seems things were kept secret so the father of the house wouldn’t hear of it. Having a part-time job or working as a tutor, it seems various things were kept on the down-low. That father, wasn’t there anything he had been brought into the loop on?

“Even though things may have appeared that way, it all stopped when I gave up trying to become a Buddhist priest. I wasn’t looking for work; I was invited to help out by the owner. If I can earn the experience while working, eventually I want to take over as a shop manager.”

“Is that true?” How much of that is true, she really didn’t know. She didn’t think the conversation up until now could have been made on a foundation of complete falsehoods. For instance, it was likely that he had the part-time jobs he mentioned previously. Since it seemed like her older brother’s relationship with their father had improved, she should hear the story from the other party as well.

“Would you like to try some?”

“Is it all right?”

“Of course.” Her brother boldly cut the pound cake with a kitchen knife and placed it in front of Shimako.

“Onii-sama has always been more skillful than I.”

In appearance this was a very normal pound cake. However, it had a faint sweetness that melted on the tongue; the aftertaste was enveloping. It was a taste that cannot be forgotten after eating even one mouthful. She felt rather like a child receiving something from an adult. It was mysterious that such large, rugged hands could produce such a delicate taste.

As she tasted it, her older brother had a serious look on his face.

“Hey... Is it true you got yourself a guy?”

“A guy?” She had been unconcernedly eating cake while he was talking, and at this she almost choked. Somehow she was able to wash the cake down with some tea.

“Who told you that?”

“I had a telephone call from a friend a little while ago. That person, how do I put this... He said he saw you with a guy.”

“I was with... A man? When?”

“Seems like sometime around summer vacation. During a Buddhist statue exhibit.”

“Ohh.” Shimako nodded vigorously. This wasn’t a case of mistaken identity. Indeed, they seem to have accurately recognized me after all.

“By ‘ohh’ can I take it to mean that it’s true?”

“Yes, but we weren’t alone. That man is a friend of Father’s. His name is Shimura-san. Maybe you’ve heard the name before?” Having been invited by Noriko, the three of us had gone to see the Buddhist statue exhibit. It’s possible she and Takuya-kun had been seen during the time when Noriko had slipped away to the bathroom.

“Shimura-san is a grandfather, isn’t he?” her brother spoke angrily. Apparently he had only heard the word “man” in his conversation. They probably hadn’t touched on the man’s face or features. Likely, this friend had purposefully omitted a key element of the story because her brother’s reaction had been amusing. “I see. I don’t remember you expressing much interest in Buddhism. So what are you saying? That you went on a group date in order to see a Buddhist statue. That’s very... Suspect.”

“To say that I have no interest in Buddhism is inaccurate,” Shimako corrected him with a smile.

“Oh really?” her brother replied, giving an astonished face. As they meet only occasionally what would he know of her likes and dislikes? Although her brother might be fully-grown, it didn’t mean development for Shimako had ceased.

“Lately, someone’s been influencing me.”

“Shimura-san?”

“No, my underclassman. Before we left, do you remember the girl who tried to restrain you?”

“Ah, now there was spirit.”

“Yes, I’ve made her my little sister.”

“I see. That’s good.” Her brother partially closed his eyes and drank his tea. “You’ve turned a gentle color.”

“Color?”

“If the former was meringue, this is whipped cream.”

“Even your examples are baked goods.” However, this neatly conveyed what he had meant. Her brother was carefully probing her.

“It seems everyday has been gentle.”

“Being so peaceful is frightening.” He laughed jokingly, but her brother had a serious face and he was watching her intently. It left her quite ill at ease.

“What?” Shimako asked.

“Peace and calm are unpleasant for you?” he replied.

“That’s not...” She tried to explain it as only being a joke. More important was what her brother had said earlier.

“If you were to leave the house, it doesn’t mean I’d start thinking about coming back.” When she stopped to think about what he was saying...

“Is that right? If I left, I’d be giving you the okay to move home?”

“That’s not it.” Her brother was wholly denying that. “Because I’m a no-good son, if you were to marry a superior priest, then the temple would prosper. That’s what I think.”

“But I...”

“I know. You’re more interested in Mighty Jesus than Shakyamuni Buddha.” Her older brother brought his hands together in prayer and then crossed himself. Shimako thought this was wholly unnecessary. “So then what? Do you still want to become a nun?”

“I don’t know.”

“I see. Well, that’s fine.” Her older brother patted her shoulders. He seemed to be satisfied with Shimako’s “I don’t know” answer. It was true she had clearly stated before, “I want to become a nun.” She had more or less altered her original intention. She had been made to recognize that by these kinds of things.

Before she knew it, it had gotten dark out. With the ringing of the evening bell, she confirmed there was indeed a temple directly behind them. If she didn’t start for home soon, their parents would worry. She carried her plate and her teacup to the sink.

“Onii-sama...”

“Hmm?”

“When you marry and return home, I won’t be immediately leaving because...”

“There’s no certainty I’ll find a wife.” He picked up the car keys, which had been tossed away onto a table and said, “I’ll drive you back. And anyway, Father is healthy; there’s no need for me to return. I know it’s unfair but, please be dutiful to our parents enough for the both of us.”

“...” Shimako thought.

Their relatives having always had to deal with such an unfettered person, she didn't feel there was cause enough to do anything.

Part 5.

“Riko~” from the couch in the living room, Sumireko-san called. “Answer the phone. I’m doing my nails; I can’t answer it.” Twisting the faucet off, she could indeed hear the sound of the phone.

“Okay.” That Sumireko-san. Even if she was in the middle of painting her nails, it wouldn’t matter. Lately, any time Noriko was about, she wouldn’t answer the phone. This was the kind of landlord-tenant power struggle that had materialized.

“I’m getting it now.” Having interrupted her tidying up after dinner, Noriko rushed to grab the telephone receiver. She anticipated who this might be. “Hello?”

“Hello, Noriko?” It was the long-awaited telephone call.

As promised, she’d received a phone call from Shimako-san.

Just as Sei-sama had said, the Apron Man had only been her brother and they had gone off to have a chat. They were separated in age by ten years or more. For as long as she could remember he had attended boarding school, and she seemed to have only scattered memories of having lived together.

“Ahh, I see. He tentatively thought about becoming a Buddhist priest.”

Shimako-san laughed into the telephone receiver. Although “Ahh, I see” and “tentatively” don’t go together in a set. She probably couldn’t top the novel appearance of a cooking apron and sunglasses.

“What did your older brother need to talk about?”

“That’s...” Shimako-san began with a strained laugh.

That panicking priest of an older brother, from a conversation with a friend, was led to believe that Shimako-san and Takuya-kun were lovers. He must have been worried about his little sister. If it was that sort of thing, it explained his actions before. “It was the same for me,” Noriko thought.

“That’s right. But, he seems to have been hurried.”

“What happened?”

“He ran out in the middle of baking a cake.”

“...What’s with that, Mr. Priestly Watchful Older Brother?”

She’d never heard of a person studying in a temple and baking cakes on the side. Or was that a hobby?

“That’s because, didn’t I tell you,” Shimako-san said. “He’s only tentatively going into the priesthood.” Given that her speech was reduced to a whisper, her father or someone might have been walking nearby. Discussing her older brother is probably a taboo subject at home.

“Incidentally, I met Shimako-san’s Onee-sama.” Noriko tried to change the subject.

“Umm, really? What did you talk about?” Suddenly Shimako-san’s voice became extremely bright.

“Nothing really. Just making conversation. She treated me to coffee.”

“Did you properly thank her?”

“I did, but... That person, is she really Shimako-san’s oneesama?”

“Sei-sama? Oh yes.” Based on how Shimako-san had responded, she had probably been a very wonderful person. Noriko’s feelings were becoming labyrinthine. (No way...)

Likely, Shimako-san had been spared having her body stroked by that person in that way.

The Heaviness of Reverie

Part 1.

“Shimako-san is being... Weird?”

Yumi narrowed her eyes at Tsutako’s comment.

“Shh, you’re too loud.”

Tsutako-san warned, and looked around. But classrooms become noisy after the afternoon cleaning is done, so nobody noticed their hushed conversation.

“Being weird?”

Yumi copied Tsutako-san, and lowered her voice. Yumi had met Shimako-san both yesterday and today at the Rose Mansion, but nothing seemed different about her.

“This is news from Wisteria Class, in other words, it’s information I gathered from Shimako-san’s classmate Katsura-san.”

“Oh.”

“She acts fine normally. She’s fine in class, during homeroom, and in conversations. But during breaks, or when she thinks no-one else is there, she spaces out. It’s the kind of spacing out that makes people wary of getting near her. As if she’s lost in her thoughts. Maybe she’s having some problems, Katsura-san was thinking.”

Spacing Out.

(Yep.)

This isn’t the Cherry Blossom season though, Yumi thought as she looked outside.

“But Shimako-san’s one of those spacing-out types, isn’t she?”

“She is, isn’t she.”

Tsutako-san first laughed loudly, then dealt her next card.

“Oh, then what’s this? Yesterday when going home, Shimako-san got in a car being driven by a shady-looking guy; it drove off in a different direction than her home.”

“Eh?”

“One more thing. Noriko-chan, who had been waiting there by herself, was later escorted by a mysterious university student toward the university building.”

Well wasn’t this becoming a noisy affair.

“Is that also from Katsura-san?”

Yumi-san asked for confirmation, but Tsutako-san shook her head.

“Actually, it was Naitō Shōko-chan.”

“Haha.”

“What is this ‘haha’ business? Shōko was just going home, when she happened to see Noriko ... What do you think of this?”

This?

“Why are you asking me?”

“Yumi-san just seems like the right person here.”

I meet her everyday at the Rose Mansion, and she’s a good friend of mine, huh. But so was Yoshino-san.

“Well, Yoshino-san has been busy with her own things lately, and she’s had her thoughts on one person so.”

Or that’s how it seemed.

Of course Yoshino-san was far from depressed. She had a lot going on with her sœur relationship, but she had also suddenly begun putting a lot of time into her clubs. Everyone knew that Reisama was soon going to retire her post, so Yoshino-san kept up the hard work for her sake.

“In other words, Tsutako-san is worried about Shimako-san, but has no real evidence huh.”

“Exactly.”

“Have you tried asking her yourself?”

That was the fastest method. Tsutako-san grasped onto Yumi’s shoulder, and said.

“I won’t go and ask her. If I were in her class, then I could simply go up to her and talk, but if I were to just randomly come up to her it would be unseemly. That kind of showy thing would get me caught by the newspaper.”

The girl that Tsutako-san had been hiding from all along was their class’s Yamaguchi Mami-san, and her Magic Eye. Mami-san was the high school newspaper, Lilian Kawaraban’s, chief editor.

“The moment you take a step outside of the gate, your affairs become private. If I follow her, or prod her about such affairs, wouldn’t she feel weird?”

“But you’re still worried?”

“Yep. So instead, there’s Yumi-san. You can ask her, right?”

“Um yeah, well...”

Without giving a definite answer, Yumi gave a “I’ll do what I can” type answer, and left for the Rose Mansion.

Part 2.

Is Shimako really worrying about something?

Yumi thought to herself, as she climbed the creaking stairs. She had heard about it from Katsura-san and Tsutako-san's findings, but when she had first seen it herself, she had been shocked.

It really wasn't her imagination, was it.

Did Noriko, Shimako's sœur, sense this too?

Whether Noriko had sensed it or not, she had better do what she can for Shimako-san at this point.

But what could she do?

She pondered back and forth, but at any rate, she needed to meet with the real Shimako-san. Yumi built up her resolve, opened the biscuit-like door, and cheerily said "Good day".

"Goood day"

The White Rose Sisters were inside the second floor clubhouse.

"If you happen to meet Rosa Chinensis later, then please tell her that I'll be a little late."

Noriko-chan told Yumi as she sipped her tea.

"I see."

Yumi nodded, and went over to Shimako-san. When Yumi had entered the room, Shimako-san had smiled and said "Good day" in greeting, but now she was sitting on a chair near the window, and looking out at scenery.

"Where's Yoshino-san? Club stuff?"

Shimako-san turned around and asked, perhaps noticing Yumi's glance.

"Yep. She seems to have gotten very into it lately."

"I see. Well good luck to her then."

Shimako-san smiled gently, but, and perhaps this was Yumi's imagination, she didn't seem happy. But whether the unhappiness came from fatigue, or troubles, or feeling lonely, Yumi could not tell.

So Yumi tried asking.

“Shimako-san. Did something happen?”

Tsutako-san had told her not to do it this way, Yumi reflected, but there were direct methods for doing such things.

“Huh? Why?”

Shimako-san quickly darted her eyes.

“Just wondering.”

While Yumi did seem as if she were just wondering, she just couldn’t think of anything else to say to Shimako-san. Shimako-san replied:

“...”

Shimako-san didn’t know how to react.

“I’m sorry. I couldn’t really say it the way I wanted to before but, I was wondering if Shimako-san had been brooding about something. Just something. If she was brooding, then I wondered if I could do anything about it. Uh, well, it’s not as big of a thing as it sounds, but I was just wondering, you know, if I could, just like maybe, come to be some use for Shimako or something.”

Yumi wondered just what she was really saying, but went on talking.

And then.

“H...”

Shimako-san’s lips suddenly quivered out a sigh.

(H...?)

“Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha, ha-ha-ha, a-ha-ha-ha...”

“Shi... Shimako-san?”

Yumi wondered what in the world was going on. The only thing she could concretely grasp about the situation was that Shimako-san was laughing.

“Nothing,ahaha, Yumi-san you!”

“Onee-sama, what happened?”

Noriko-chan too stopped sipping her tea, and came over.

“Whatever happened Noriko, just listen! Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!!!”

Both Yumi and Noriko-chan just stood there, dumbstruck, unable to do anything.

“Ahh, what’s wrong, I can’t stop!”

Shimako-san held her stomach, and laughed for three minutes, as tears began streaming down her face.

“...Shimako broke.”

Sachiko-sama said as she entered the room.



Rosa Chinensis's Sigh

After-Finals Prize

Part 1.

At first, Yumi didn't really understand what Sachiko-sama was trying to say.

“Well then.”

It was December, after school, on the second floor of the Rose Mansion.

Final exams were going to start soon, so today would be their last regular meeting. The next meeting was on the last day of finals, so after the formal meeting, everyone began talking.

So everyone's voice began mixing together.

But perhaps the most important reason why she couldn't understand what she was saying, was because she never expected Sachiko-sama to say something like it. No, never.

“After finals, do you want to go to the amusement park?”

--- Well.

For a second, everything went quiet. Rose Mansion. Just now. Something. Had happened. She had felt it.

“Huh?”

Yumi-sama asked her Onee-sama.

The truth was that Sachiko-sama had actually spoken while everyone else was speaking, but because the situation was as it was, Sachiko-sama took care to guide the conversation, and to look closely at Yumi's face for her reaction.

(Ah, she's waiting for my answer.)

She was waiting with unwavering eyes.

(What a weight on my shoulders.)

She broke out into a cold sweat.

With Sachiko-sama this way, she couldn't just reply back with "I don't really understand what you mean by this, Onee-sama". Then maybe, she had no real need to confirm the words that Sachiko-sama had just uttered. Plus, everyone else was giving her an "I want to help, but I don't know how" look.

By "everyone", she of course meant the Yellow Rose Family, Rei-sama and Yoshino-san, and the White Rose Family, Shimako-san and Noriko-chan.

"Could you repeat your question, please?"

First, determine the foundation. Just to avoid the chance that there had been a mistake in Yumi's interpretation of Sachiko-sama's words. But.

"Do you want to go to the amusement park? That's all I had asked."

All possibilities of misunderstanding had disappeared. There was no mistaking it, Sachiko-sama had just proposed that the two go to an amusement park.

"By amusement park, you mean the amusement park, right?"

There was a reason behind the seemingly-idiotic question that Yumi had asked. A long time ago, the question of deciding whether or not to go to this famous place had almost driven the Rosa Chinensis Family into separation. But the misunderstanding, and the uneasiness it had caused had long passed, and the bond between the two had long ago strengthened, and everything had turned out all right...

But still, it was that untouchable place. The amusement park.

This can only be approached with patience, Yumi thought, as she put the brake on her speeding thoughts. False happiness can lead to much damage.

"Well, it's a place with rides, and attractions, and fun places to go to, and character dolls, and..."

Sachiko-sama cut Yumi's wandering explanation short.

"What other kind of amusement park is there?"

“Um, well.”

So there was no misunderstanding about the meaning of the word “amusement park” then.

(Which means... Well what does it mean?)

Yumi tried desperately to remember what her previous conversation had been about. Just what had she been talking about before Sachiko-sama’s “Well then”.

Oh, yeah. Yoshino-san had said, “Final exams are a real drag”.

Rei-sama had replied with something along the lines of “Because Yoshino doesn’t study any of the subjects that she isn’t good at,” and Yoshino glared back at Rei-sama. Ahh, something still felt missing from the flow of conversation.

Right.

Then Yoshino-san, the person who needed no luck, requested “I’ll be thinking about what to do when I’m done with exams. So please, wish me luck.” While Yumi was wondering whether Yoshino-san’s idea had had any effect, Shimako-san had replied in a light voice “Noriko and I will be making a small trip to observe Buddha statues.”

Right, right.

Then Yoshino-san burst out suddenly “That’s right, see. Someone should give me something. You know, when you first start winter vacation, you’re still a little confused. You just want to do something fun during winter break. You feel like you just have to go somewhere. What do you say, Yumi-san? You wanna go somewhere? Or should we all go as a group?” or she had said something like that. And when Yumi was brushing it aside, Sachiko-sama had let loose her “Well then.”

That means.

“So you had asked me if I wanted to go to the amusement park after finals?”

Yumi asked, madly trying to get confirmation. Onee-sama replied back with a deflated look.

“Isn’t that what I had said in the first place?”

“Um...”

So it wasn’t false happiness, but real happiness.

“But I won’t ride any roller coasters.”

Wow. Then it had to be real.

“I’m happy, I’m so happy! What should I do. Oh, uh, everyone, how many are you, you know, who don’t like the amusement park?”

“Yumi”, Sachiko-sama said, interrupting Yumi.

“I’m sorry.”

Did she do something wrong again. It was because she was going too fast, again. But.

“I don’t really understand why you’re apologizing though.”

Sachiko-sama continued.

“We’ll go together to the amusement park, just the two of us of course.”

“Huh.”

Well then.

Then what.

Then this is, no it can’t be, but maybe it’s a.

Date!

Part 2.

“But, it really surprised me!”

Yoshino-san said as she closed her English textbook.

“I know she really didn’t want to make a scene, but maybe, you know, like what if, you know because I had asked whether we should all go, in like an invitation, but when she said only the two of us, it was like she was waiting to refuse or something.”

It was the second day of final exams.

The words “First Period, English Grammar. Second Period, Mathematics. Third Period, Religion” were written in bold on the second year Pine Class blackboard.

Yoshino-san was in that mode where she was hoping to memorize just one more word until the instructor came in. When she became engrossed in her conversation, she didn’t notice that she had closed the English textbook.

“But when Sachiko-sama just blurted out, without any reservations, that ‘just the two of us’, she even added ‘of course’.”

She rolled the English textbook around, and began to shift around. Yoshino-san loved the topic, so even days after the incident happened, she kept expressing over and over again how embarrassed she was with the incident to Yumi.

When she carried on in such a nosy way, for some reason, Yumi’s mind refused to settle on the conversation. For some reason, she kept wanting to scream “Please stop!” and run away so quickly that her cheeks would become red.

“Hey, how come you have such a bored look on your face?”

Yoshino-san quickly noticed her lack of attention.

“No, don’t stop now. Keep going if you’re having fun with it.”

Yumi had no choice but to raise her two hands in the air, and say “waaai” as if she were reading from an old Chinese text.

“Hey.”

“And you know what, something was on my mind before.”

“Hey, hey.”

“But, you know, I wonder.”

“I wonder?”

Yoshino-san made the same face she would make when she would look at an equation, because she was bad at math, a deflated look. For that matter, Yumi herself didn't know what she had meant by “I wonder”.

“Why, what's wrong? Is Sachiko-sama scheming about something?”

“Not scheming. It's just that, she's fulfilling a promise she made a long, long time ago.”

“I don't understand anything.”

“I don't really understand it but, I feel lonely.”

“Huh?”

“She said it would just be the two of us so I would think I'd be happy but.”

She was happy but, she felt equally happy and lonely.

“Nothing's making sense.”

“Well you know what I mean, like making new memories.”

“Aha. I see. Now I think I sort of understand.”

Yoshino-san said, but did not show any pity for Yumi.

“I had a feeling that maybe that's what you were trying to say. Yumi-san just worries too much. Sometimes you shouldn't just worry and worry and lurch along, and instead keep going ahead without any hesitations.”

Yumi quickly replied “Maybe” without being able to contribute anything else to the conversation.

“It's a useless waste of time you know. It's better to just stick to the outside track, rather than running around in circles in a marathon, right?”

“It is isn't it.”

She smiled for what seemed a lifetime, and wove her eyebrows into wrinkles for what seemed another lifetime.

What she could do now, she wouldn't be able to do again tomorrow.

And the thing she needed to do was.

"Yoshino-san, how are you on your model sentences?"

"Ahhh!"

She turned away and quickly began concentrating upon her textbook, and so Yumi too opened her textbook.

Aaah.

Why did they have to make finals so comprehensive.

High Tension and Roller Coasters

Part 1.

The morning of the amusement park date was a cloudy one.

“But you know, there’s a zero percent chance of rain.”

The final examinations, which for so long had been a towering cloud of gray, had finally gone somewhere not to be found, and so her mood had cleared. If she were to think of something as gray again, she would think of the school closing ceremony. She hadn’t returned the questionnaire, but because of that she had received a notice today.

“I’ve heard that the amusement park is fairly empty during the winter.”

Her younger brother Yūki said from behind, as he looked over the weather predictions for the day in the newspaper from the living room.

“Really?”

Both of them were on post-exam vacation, but seeing him up at 7 AM was rare. And seeing that he wasn’t in pajamas, she knew he wasn’t taking a bathroom break before going back to bed again.

In the kitchen, on top of the gas stove, the sounds of a moving frying pan could be heard. Because she had heard the sound of cracking eggs, her mother was probably making scrambled eggs.

“But you know, this time of year really doesn’t feel like that kind of season. That’s why not as many people will come. That’s what I’ve heard.”

Yūki said, as he raised his morning paper.

“Aah. But in the winter there are people who go sleeveless underneath their jackets, and in the summer there are people who even wear fur coats.”

“Plus there’s also holidays, and universities, and winter holidays and all. Just high-school kids like Yumi and I might have exam holidays, but the whole country has some holiday or another now.”

“But at least there won’t be any middle school kids, right?”

“Lately, there have been parents who take their kids out for holiday from school.”

Her brother checked the news once more, and Yūki was just closing the newspaper when Yumi realized.

“Yūki, we’re really siblings aren’t we?”

“Wait, why are you thinking about this now.”

Yūki proudly made a bland face, showing off his boredom.

“Really happy when fun things are in front of our faces, right? And then, when our feelings start floating and running around, we have to put a brake to our heart to put some control into it, right. When you go too far at something, this is what you do, right.”

“.....”

Ah, he didn’t reply. She knew him well.

Maybe it was because he had been in a bad mood since the morning, Yumi thought, and quickly changed the subject.

“By the way, Yūki, why are you up so early today? Are you going out somewhere?”

“Yeah.”

After Yūki folded up the newspaper, and turned toward the kitchen, Yumi began following Yūki and asked, “Where are you going?”

“School. I don’t know anything else, but last night while Yumi was in the shower, Kashiwagi-senpai had called.”

“And?”

“He called me over.”

Yūki took out some milk from the fridge, poured it into a cup, and gulped it down.

“Called you over? To school? Why?”

“I don’t know. He said we’d discuss the details once I got there. He wanted me to help him out with something, it seemed like.”

Yumi followed Yūki, who put down his glass and quickly left the kitchen.

“So will you go?”

“Aah, well, I can’t not.”

“Even if you don’t know what’s going to happen?”

Maybe she was being a bit nosy but, she couldn’t help herself.

It’s just that, Yūki was going to meet with that Kashiwagi-san guy. If it were Kobayashi-kun, or Takada-kun, then she’d have no worries.

Kashiwagi Suguru-san was Yūki’s upperclassman who had attended Hanadera Gakuin. He was snobbish, a bit monklike, Sachiko-sama’s cousin, her fiancée by parental decree, but also a rumored homosexual, and somehow she felt as if he was after Yūki... There’s no point explaining any more. Basically, his existence made Yumi unhappy.

“I can’t really find a way to say it but, I think Kashiwagi-senpai has a lot of moments where he has fun by forcefully calling others to come.”

“Well.”

That Yūki, he worries me so. On New Year’s Day, when we had gone to visit Sachiko-sama at her house, Yūki came to the girls’ room and cried because he had to share a room with Kashiwagi-san.

Whatever this was, it didn’t sound like fun.

She didn’t really think anything had happened between Yūki and Kashiwagi. Just that, dumping her brother with Kashiwagi-san wasn’t a fun idea.

Yūki finished his breakfast quickly too, and beat Yumi out the door.

Part 2.

She had arrived fifteen minutes early to the rendezvous point, but Sachiko-sama could still be seen at M Station.

“I couldn’t sleep well because of the excitement, so I got up, and quickly came here.”

“Onee-sama, couldn’t sleep because of the excitement...”

“**I woke up even before the golfers do,** is what they say right? Something like that.”

Yumi took it to be a synonym for “Because it was so much fun”, but maybe she had meant something different. But it wasn’t any different, and when Yumi confirmed this to herself, she felt overjoyed.

“My family, you know, they wanted me to go by car. And not to the station, but to the amusement park. I had a horrible time trying to convince them otherwise.”

“**By car...**”

Nowadays, Yumi didn’t even think about such methods of transportation. If the whole family wanted to go to the amusement park, then they would go in Dad’s car, and Dad would drive them, but as a high-school student, it’s expected that Yumi would ride a bus or a train.

“None of them understand me. Riding with Yumi, just the two of us, in the midst of a crowd, being jostled up and down, and getting lost while changing stations, it’s all really fun.”

“Being in the midst of a crowd and getting lost is fun?”

Generally keeping a distance from crowds would be fun.

“If it’s only the two of us, then it’s very fun.”

“Onee-sama...”

Yumi became suddenly overcome with affection, but replied with a sober “No, you know”.

“We can’t do anything about the crowds, but we can find ways to choose the train car we get on. And we can also make sure that we don’t get lost.”

Danger. Danger. If she became careless; well she had no room to go wrong. If she did, then she wondered why she had looked up on her father's computer the stations and the train timings and the fares in the first place.

Keep it together, Yumi. It wasn't anymore a matter of if, but when. Don't get swept up in Onee-sama's pace. Yumi dropped into a pose where she made a tiny, tiny fist, and Sachiko-sama reached her hands out toward Yumi's neck, to straighten her collar.

Even though today she had no uniform, this was Sachiko-sama's trademark.

The two had both worn straight, blue jeans, even though they had not made plans to dress similarly. It was the same type of jeans that Sachiko-sama had bought on their first date. The shoes too were the same that they bought on the trip. And like the rest of her clothing, she wore a white, decoration-less, plain shirt, with the top most button open.

Yumi on the other hand wore something completely different than what she had worn to her first date, Yumi wondered as Sachiko-sama fixed Yumi's collar. Then, Yumi had felt a gap between her and her adult-like Onee-sama's dress sense, so she wanted to appear more sophisticated. In the end, Sachiko-sama had instead come to her level. Was this really for the best? Well, Sachiko-sama was enthralled by her new style, so she guessed everything was fine.

The train finally entered the station, and they got onto it.

Again there was a large rush, but they had prepared for the worst. Both of them lined up in front of the door. Indeed, during winter holiday and exam holiday, it seemed that the amount of students decreased. Plus, Yumi used the bus everyday, so she didn't know anything about the confusion on a train other than what her classmates had told her.

Until the time came to change trains, everything went smoothly. Sachiko-sama had planned to play some games along the way, so we played “Atamatori” as the train bounced up and down.

Atamatori was the opposite of Shiritori, where the first person says a word, and the other person must say a word whose last letter was the originally said word’s first letter. For example, if someone says “Gorilla”, the “G” is carried over, then the other person can say “Thrilling”, and so on it goes.

Start! First up, Yumi.

“Atamatori”

“Ah, um, well, Aria”

Oh, Sachiko-sama slipped. Smooth.

“Freesia”

“Fuufu”

“F... Sukaafu.”

What’s wrong Yumi. You’re slowing down. Contrastingly, Onee-sama was gaining speed.

“Suraisu.”

“Rirakusu.”

What in the area looks weird, Yumi wondered.

“Rinri.”

“Ri... Um, Onee-sama, haven’t all the previous words had ‘ri’ for the next beginning?”

“Haha, are you just noticing this now?”

“But Onee-sama, aren’t you just fooling around with me? Making me think so hard like that.”

“But it was a nice exercise for your mind, wasn’t it?”

Sachiko-sama laughed dryly.

“Mind exercise.”

This imōto who never trained her mind had no reply.

Since they had switched trains, they had then played “Double Shiritori”, and got to have good fun with her Onee-sama. After the next train switch, she competed with her Onee-sama in “What you see Shiritori”.

In Double Shiritori, the last two letters are taken and appended to the end of the next word. For example, if you start the game with “Shiritori”, then you continue with “**Riddle**” or “**Rise**”, and you go on from there.

“What you see Shiritori” had the same rules as Shiritori. The only difference was the addition of a rule that said that you could only use things that you can see, which made it much harder. If the syllable is ‘To’ and you look out of the window and see something like ‘Torii’, then perfect. People’s names and city names were fine, so if Torii Eriko-sama were to enter into the same train, then it would obviously okay to use her name, but... Having a coincidence like that occur was highly unlikely.

In such a situation, those with expansive vocabularies would have the easiest times. If you were to see a sign that’s color was in between light and dark blue, saying “Hanada Color” would be great. If you were to see the style of kimono sash of an old lady sitting in a seat in the distance, and say “Yoshino Kantou”, even that would be great.

But because there was no referee, she wasn’t sure whether that would work or not. Sachiko-sama had her strong and weak points, for example she didn’t know any small console game’s names. As they took trains that took them closer to their destination, she knew she wasn’t just imagining that the percentage of kids on the train was increasing. So they were going to the same place, huh. Winter holiday. It was a bit emptier than usual, but just a bit, and in reality it would probably be overcrowded.

Danger, danger. If she didn't think in a more positive light, then. Times like this she should learn from her Onee-sama how to behave under high tension.

(The amusement parks crowds, and lining up was fun. How could that be?)

Just as Yumi began lightening up her mood, the train reached its destination station.

But no matter how many positive things she thought about, there was no turning away from the truth in front of her eyes. She wondered how she could comprehend this truth.

“Why...”

When the Rosa Chinensis sisters reached the bubbling amusement park entrance, both of them exclaimed at the same time.

Just why in the world. Over there.

“Well...”

Just like an ancient idol, a man raised one hand in the air and returned a careless smile. And beside that person, was --.

“Even I would like to know why.”

Not cheerful, not even cold, but it was the smile of one having been caught. This representative boy was the other.

Basically, for some reason it was the odd couple Kashiwagi Suguru and Fukuzawa Yūki.

“Suguru-san. What is the meaning of this? When we talked yesterday you said absolutely nothing.”

Sachiko, who had been in a good mood until now, had the smile wiped off her face.

“Of course I know. That's why I took the car, right?”

Now that Kashiwagi-san had mentioned it, Sachiko-sama had talked about it earlier. The “others” of the “family and others” seemed like it had been Kashiwagi-san. But, just what in the world was Kashiwagi-san planning.

“Well then, why are you here?”



Of course Sachiko-sama asked. And, Kashiwagi's opposing answer was.

"Maybe I shouldn't have. But just because you girls came, doesn't mean that we can't enter the amusement park, right?"

Of course. The amusement park wasn't Sachiko-sama's for today. And Kashiwagi-san, who himself had brought nothing, wasn't wrong. Was something bothering him, or did he have something more to say, Yumi wondered deeply. Unlike Kashiwagi-san, Yumi thought deeply about such things.

"I understand. You guys came to the park to have fun, with no connection to us, right."

Sachiko-sama became summarily nonplussed.

"Right. No connection. If you think of it like that, then it'll be for the best."

It was like a posed-smile for a commercial, just somehow coming out. But now was the time to talk to her brother, the Fukuzawa twins looked after each other closely, and now she needed to help her brother.

"Then why does it seem like you camped out at the entrance?"

"In this huge space, and with so many people, do you really think once we get inside that we would be able to secretly search you out? Don't you think that would be pointless?"

"Quite a stalker huh. I'm tired of hearing you talk about how you won't meet us."

"You're welcome."

He said it without having any reason for giving praise or extending courtesy. They stood together, the intolerable Kashiwagi-san and his polar opposite, her dwarf brother Yūki.

"Kashiwagi-san asked for my help."

Yumi questioned Yūki quietly about what happened. So then.

“Trust me Yumi. I really didn’t know about this. When I met him in front of the school gate, I had no chance to question him, he just whisked me in the car, and then this.”

When I looked at the pleading eyes behind the plea of “Trust me”, and looked at this 16-year-old’s involvement, I understood that he wasn’t lying. As a guy though, what did he mean by being just whisked into the car.

“So you came in Kashiwagi-san’s car?”

“Yeah, and he’s a horrible driver.”

No matter how you looked at it, Yūki wasn’t happy. Not only had he been forced into derailing his sister’s plans, but he had also been sapped mentally and physically by Kashiwagi-san’s bad driving. Maybe there was a connection between the two. Kashiwagi-san’s driving is, to put it lightly -- dynamic, to put it badly -- chaos.

“So Yumi, let’s go and buy the tickets. The time we spend associating with these people is wasted.”

Sachiko-sama gave up resisting Kashiwagi-san, and walked over to the ticket booth.

Not knowing was one thing, but having your brother be one of the meddling two. It was an embarrassment to the Fukuzawa family. But once she thought about it, she had shown her Onee-sama many such embarrassments of her family. Perhaps even in this situation, Sachiko-sama would let it slide.

“It’s not Yūki-san’s fault. Suguru-san forced him into it.”

Sachiko-sama laughed with a look on her face that said “That kid worries me”. Good job, Yūki. Sachiko-sama honestly understood the situation.

“But just what in the world...”

Sachiko-sama took her purse out of her shoulder bag, and glanced over at the entrance to the amusement park where they had met Kashiwagi-san and Yūki earlier.

“He’s not the type of person who would just come to the amusement park to annoy us once he heard that we were coming.”

There were no definite subjects in her sentence, but it was none other than Suguru-san.

“Maybe he was just jealous of us...”

Yumi was not at all enthused with the sudden preoccupation that Sachiko-sama had developed with Kashiwagi-san.

Part 3.

While they planned the date, Onee-sama and Yumi had worked out the budget for today.

So when she opened her purse and paid, Sachiko-sama gave money no heed. Even whatever location they would end up eating lunch at had been judiciously planned for. Onee-sama's household was a very wealthy one, but both of them were just high school students who lived off their parents' money, so even the Fukuzawa family had contributed their proper share.

Whether they were being treated or just having their due depended on what their parents felt as the actual money earners. Onee-sama would ask in a boring way "If you could fulfill my request..." To her parents, but in the end it had gotten the job done. Unlike what she had said to her parents, when the two approached a store, Onee-sama told her that they would buy things in the store together.

If they hadn't gone inside, Yumi didn't know what she would have done. But Yumi was very happy about what she thought could happen. What kind of a perfect day is there like today to buy things to hold their memories.

"Wow"

From outside of the entrance, the smell was overwhelming, but when she entered it felt as if she had been transported away from reality into fairy-tale land. The language inside was Japanese, but it wasn't Japan. It wasn't even France, nor America, nor Africa, not even Australia. Maybe somewhere above the Earth, in some nowhere-land.

"It's a whole other world."

When she would come to places like this, she would immediately begin wanting to run all around. Perhaps because she still had a child's heart. Until now when she looked at Onee-sama she stared and thought, "She's going to leave soon". The moment she had crossed the gate, everything flipped around. But good. In this world of dreams, she had won this person as her prize. She felt no shame.

“Onee-sama, over here, over here! Hurry, Onee-sama, let’s get in line!”

Yumi entered just a bit quicker than the others, and waved back to Onee-sama.

“Please wait, Yumi!”

Laughing, Sachiko-sama gently ran after her. What fun!

The inside of the park was a bit crowded, but not uncomfortably so. Everywhere she looked there was something to do, but everything had a small line attached, not that she cared. To quote Onee-sama “Lining up is fun”.

Everyone in the park was a resident of this fairy land. If you thought like that, then you could think of everyone as friends, who came to enjoy together.

Ah, but.

“I thought we wouldn’t be able to see their faces.”

Waiting in line for a ride, those guys who had earlier talked about “No connection” and “Freedom,” were wedged inside a group of five girls. They had said such bombastic things earlier, but it seemed like they had full intention to follow Onee-sama and her.

“Woow. You’re from Gunma? And today’s a free day for you?”

Kashiwagi-san, that idiot, was talking with the college-aged Onee-sans around him, and his speech seemed to make the surrounding flowers bloom. Shy Yūki didn’t enter the conversation, and perhaps because he was worried about his real sister’s reaction, he would occasionally glance furtively at her.

“Wooow two guys together seems that suspicious? We’re hurt you see, the two of us, we were blown off by our sweethearts, so we came here to lick each other’s wounds, so to speak.”

Who were these sweethearts. Just what was this licking each other’s wounds thing. Two guys together looks that suspicious? Just look who’s saying that, Kashiwagi-san.

“Yumi, there’s no point. If you show a reaction to Suguru-san, then you do exactly what he wants you to do.”

“A reaction, well...”

“Oh? Then please stop looking backward. It would be horrible if you were mistakenly looking at Suguru-san.”

“...Sure.”

Now that Sachiko-sama had mentioned it, she hadn’t even noticed that she had fixed her attention backward.

Even Onee-sama’s reasoning that Kashiwagi-san had begun talking with these unknown Onee-sans was probably right. And even if she was wrong about it, she didn’t feel that she should pay any attention to Kashiwagi-san. Of course, Kashiwagi-san’s words were bringing Yumi’s attention back to him, but not out of jealousy or any such thing, but that she would look in his direction and become unhappy.

Onee-sama was thinking in a very adult way. It’s true, they shouldn’t show any reaction. They should forget that Kashiwagi-san and Yūki were behind them. They had to.

At the ride, there were numerous groups of people riding together, entering a place that looked like a theater. And of course, the group they saw in front of their face was the “licking each other’s wounds” group. But when she factored Sachiko-sama’s request of avoiding high places, fast things, and spinning things, she felt a definite inclination to “enjoy as much as possible”, and she would not lose to the men.

When she saw a cave exploration ride that involved gently floating on the boat, the first person they would see at the end of the line was Kashiwagi-san. He would wave back toward them with a smile, and Yumi would answer in the most forceful way possible.

When they went outside, they felt a bit of the sunlight on their faces after being inside that cloudy place. They turned their faces not just up, but slightly to the West as well.

“The restaurants will probably be most crowded right now.”

Sachiko-sama said, looking at her watch. Yumi heard a sudden scream above her, she turned to see what it was, and saw a roller coaster right in the middle of its decent.

“Let’s ride on something else, and then let’s go and eat something, okay?”

Yumi replied “Sure” cheerily as Sachiko-sama leafed through the informational leaflet, which contained the park map.

And then, for some reason Sachiko-sama lifted her head from the leaflet, and stalked past Yumi’s back.

“O... Onee-sama?”

At Yumi’s back was, of course, that really cool “licking each other’s wounds” group. Sachiko-sama narrowed her eyes, went up to Yūki, and said one thing.

“Are you fine with roller coasters?”

Yūki immediately made a “yeah...” -type face, but the question had been answered.

“It’s not like I absolutely can’t go, but, I’m not really that comfortable... But?”

The last “but?” showed that some new unknown had entered the picture. Actually, even Yumi had the same “but?” whispered in her mind, and so she understood.

As soon as she heard Yūki’s response, she turned toward Kashiwagi-san and asked a quick question.

“Oh. Then, Suguru-san will be fine. Could you please take Yumi with you on a roller coaster?”

(Huh?!)

“Ok.”

(Wha?!)

Without any prior warning, Sachiko-sama asked Kashiwagi-san. This really was Sachiko-sama. And then Kashiwagi-san replied Okay. This really was Kashiwagi-san.

“And you, Sacchan?”

“I’ll sit here holding our stuff”

“Then, I’ll stay here with Sachiko-san.”

Yūki tapped Kashiwagi-san on the shoulder in a Take-good-care-of-my-sis way.

(What, why, where’s everyone going?)

So then as the conversation between the three, who had been walking quickly through the roller coaster line, died down, Yumi could only flap her mouth open and closed like a goldfish. When she finally opened her mouth, she said “But you know,” just as the conversation had come to a complete end.

“I didn’t really, on a roller coaster, I mean...”

She didn’t say it. That one sentence. When someone plays a what-comes-to-mind-first game, if the first word is “Amusement Park”, then the expected answer is “Roller Coaster”. These two images were merged in Yumi’s head, but today, because she had come together with Onee-sama, from the very beginning she had let go of the notion of the roller coaster. She wasn’t even going to look at a roller coaster with desiring eyes.

“I want to see Yumi while she’s riding. That’s fine, right?”

Yumi while she’s riding. There was no use in trying to look from above ground at a passenger high up on a roller coaster going at limitless speeds. If you could recognize someone you know on a roller coaster like this, then you were something.

That’s why, was Sachiko-sama really after this “want to see” thing? I really did not want to ride, but because it was cute whim to a younger sister, it could also be thought of as an order from the elder sister.

She really didn’t want to think of it like that. She wanted it to be that she wouldn’t have to ride on the roller coaster, and she could still have fun with her Onee-sama. Right, Yumi had protested to her Onee-sama before. She had even protested to her Onee-sama recently. But she stopped herself with a mental “wait a minute”.

It was a sort of kindness, and when she thought of it like that, Onee-sama wasn't being mean at all.

"But, even if it's Kashiwagi-san."

Yumi whispered. "Even if he's not the most comfortable, how about riding with my real brother", and she stood there. It seemed that she was alone. No that was wrong. It was three-against-one, and the situation quickly became a penalty game.

"What's wrong? If it's just a small outing like this, then isn't *Kashiwagi-san* fine?"

What a horrible thing to say. That "Kashiwagi-san" and me?

"Plus, Sacchan, we can just wait here as friends."

"..."

This was bad. Really bad. Even though they were both men, she could rely on Yūki. When there was alone, she could definitely depend on Yūki.

"Right?"

Sadly, even Kashiwagi-san had confirmed and understood Yumi's feelings.

And then.

"Suguru-san. Please take Yumi."

Just as Yumi depended on Yūki, Sachiko-sama depended on Kashiwagi-san.

That's why she had entrusted him with her 'dear' younger sister.

But to give such a "dear" thing to such an awful person. Just that "dear" part of her that loved her "dear" Onee-sama accepted Kashiwagi-san.

They gave their stuff to the two waiting on the bench, and began to walk toward the ride.

She didn't want to walk toward the line, but the thought of following Kashiwagi-san made her feel as if she were grasping on to her individuality, so Yumi walked ahead. Kashiwagi-san slowly and nonchalantly followed Yumi, diagonally behind her. He followed

slowly, but had a wide stride, so the distance between them never really widened. As the two approached the end of the line that had formed in front of the line, Kashiwagi-san, who had been following Yumi, graciously guided Yumi onward.

Saying something like “ladies first”, he began daydreaming. A do-nothing rich boy must have learned things like these in his education. He might not have any strong inclination himself, but there must be times when he must escort women to social places.

“Kashiwagi-san!”

“Hm? What about me?”

Tall Kashiwagi-san stooped over and smiled.

“Just what’s going on in your head, and just what kind of a person are you, I don’t understand.”

Yumi voiced the words just as they came to mind. And then, Kashiwagi-responded.

“Fine.”

Just what was “fine”? When he himself was made the subject of the conversation, and about this subject someone claimed that he or she didn’t understand, and then acting happy because of such conversation. This guy really loved himself, didn’t he? It has to be, Yumi thought.

“So, just what about me does Yumi not understand?”

“Why are you here?”

“Because Sacchan wanted to make Yumi ride a roller coaster, and instead of her I came along.”

“That’s not what I meant.”

Today, why did he come to the amusement park.

From the moment they met at the entrance to the amusement park, not all the time, but off-and-on, she thought about it. It became a small question in her mind that she just couldn’t get away from.

Just why was Kashiwagi-san (Yūki was just dragged into this, so he was not a part of this matter) here? He had heard from somewhere that Sachiko-sama and Yumi had a date at the amusement park, and chose the same day to stage an ambush, there was no denying it.

But then, what was he after?

Right now, Yumi was with Kashiwagi-san, but until she found out, she would not let him go. She wouldn't go around clinging to him and bothering him, but she would keep turning toward him, and would get it out of him from her vantage point.

“I’m a guard.”

“Guard?”

“Right. I may be an eyesore, but if something were to happen, then I’d be needed, or at least something like that.”

“What is this something?”

“Ahh, that’s.”

Kashiwagi-san patted Yumi’s shoulder because the front of the line was empty.

“That that. I don’t understand it!”

Ah he was purposefully muddying his words, and Yumi understood.

“Well I’ll help her if there’s an earthquake, or if we get caught in traffic and she calls me on her cell phone to go to the bathroom, then.”

In other words, that’s what Kashiwagi-san was. Not as much a guard as he was an assistant.

“So what might happen?”

Yumi hesitated, but asked anyway. With the current mood of the conversation, it wasn’t a very welcomed topic.

“I, well it’s better that I’m not needed.”

“...I see.”

“You see, but you’re still down.”

“Well.”

She couldn't really put it to words but, more than the fact that Kashiwagi-san had come because of Sachiko-sama it was the very fact that he was here that was bothering her. Looking at it from Kashiwagi-san's perspective, he wasn't a bad person, but he still troubled her. He was the manifestation of a rival love, there was no mistaking it, and while she doubted Kashiwagi-san's claims that he was actually someone outside of the arena, Yumi refused to lose.

“Don’t tell Sacchan about this conversation.”

Kashiwagi-san brought his middle finger up to his lips and made the secret gesture; Yumi nodded back silently.

It was bad to share secrets with your rival, but she just couldn't think of a way to bring up such a conversation with Sachiko-sama. She felt it would be better not to talk about it.

The line to the roller coaster lead into a tunnel that made her think of darkness.

Yumi let go of her troubling feelings on the roller coaster.

Part 4.

Yumi felt a bit refreshed after she screamed through the roller coaster, and returned to find Sachiko-sama and Yūki happily talking to each other. They were a boy-girl pair, but looked nothing like two lovers, and instead looked precisely like a princess and her retainer. The image was a bit demeaning, so she wouldn't mention it to Yūki.

After they finished the roller coaster event, it seemed as if the “no connection” and the “on purpose” groups had made up, and somehow the four decided to have lunch together. Most of the restaurants in the park had already passed peak hours for an hour-and-a-half, and two tables which looked as if they could seat two were empty. Even though it was called a restaurant, it was actually like a fast food store, where you had to order and pay at the counter, you would then take the things they placed on your tray, and sit and eat. Because Sachiko-sama already had experienced fast food last time, this time there was no doubt that she could order correctly.

“Curry.”

The actual ordering was done individually. So there was no conversation, everyone ordered, and managed their own finances, but because of this, mysteriously everyone's tray contained three different colors of curry. It was like a school lunch. For that matter though, there were several other things on the restaurant's menu.

“Well, it seems our tastes match.”

“Huuuh.”

It's not like this had been her first choice in eating but, she had not wanted to eat something that had been alive, and when she decided to change the eating location, she had scrapped the other places altogether. But if Sachiko-sama said that she enjoyed the place, then she would too. But the two men sitting next to them were making it... Hard... To enjoy the place.

But everything turned out fine in the end. The curry was spicy enough, and she was the only person who ate her plate of curry. And because everyone's breath had become so bad, those who cared most about bad breath (particularly Sachiko-sama) became particularly lenient about it. After all, noticing that on a date just wouldn't be fun.

"It seems like Yumi looked like she was having a lot of fun."

Sachiko-sama brought up the topic of the roller coaster.

"Huh? Really, could you really see what was happening from the ground?"

"It's not that. I could hear your shrill screams. There could be no way that I would mistake Yumi's screams."

Which meant that she had been keeping a sharp eye on them the whole time?

"Onee-sama."

Yes. Even though they had been apart, the two of them could stay this close together. Yumi and her feeling of being on cloud nine was deflated, and she was put back on Earth by Yūki.

"Your voice really rang out. I heard it."

"Changing the subject, Suguru-san, you conducted yourself very adult-like. Were you, maybe, scared?"

Both of the roller coaster group shrugged their shoulders dejectedly for their own particular reasons.

Even though they had eaten together with the team of two boys, the lunch had had its advantages. The **naan** that Sachiko-sama and Yumi had not eaten was eaten by Kashiwagi-san and Yūki-san. And while the girls ate a lot, the ravenous boys found no end to their appetite. She had seen the amount of resistance that Kashiwagi-san gave to Sachiko-sama when she gave him her leftovers, and it really was one at all. What really happened was the two girls took their remaining naan, and put it onto a single plate in between the two boys, so in fact there was a high chance that

some of Yumi's leftovers had found themselves into Kashiwagi-san's mouth. While there was a definite feeling of satisfaction coming from Kashiwagi-san, she would have felt much better had Yūki eaten her naan.

After lunch, they took a walk with their stuffed bellies. Even though they had taken a lunch break, Sachiko-sama's tension had not subsided. Instead, it could have been said that Sachiko-sama's tension was shining or gleaming.

"Hey, is that a character stuffed animal over there?"

And.

"Look, they're selling churros."

And.

"A bridge, a bridge."

It was as if the moment she entered the amusement park, a certain switch had been pushed, and like an excited kindergartener, it kept being flipped on and on. It was Yumi who had originally wanted to come to the amusement park. It was as if Sachiko-sama had received a special privilege. She pointed and frolicked endlessly with one hand, while the other had no choice but to become a brake.

A person who was always so composed (excusing her hysteria moments) to be in such a high-tension state made Yumi wonder if Sachiko-sama was all right. When Yumi turned back, she saw Sachiko-sama's cousin about 15 meters behind, who had decided to become Sachiko-sama's guard, but perhaps because some misunderstanding had taken place the guy was waving his hand around and was oblivious of the situation.

"Hey look, lots of people there. What is it, let's go see."

"Ah, well, slow down a little... Aah, she's not listening to me at all!"

Sachiko-sama somehow lurched to the side. Had her mother always had to act like this when Yumi had been in kindergarten?

Yumi had never seen Onee-sama like this, she reflected. It was almost as if she had eaten something bad. But everyone had eaten the same thing for lunch. Ah, but her tension had been high for morning, so if there had been a problem, it would have been with her breakfast. No, she didn't think that there would be anything weird in Ogasawara household's breakfast. She thought such things until they finally reached the place where everyone had gathered.

It was a place on the road that went through the park that was comparatively larger than other streets in the park, and felt like it could have been called the main street. But just as when a parade goes on, the people had split in two groups on opposite sides of the street, and had not really gathered together. Instead they had formed a sort of sugar crystal shaped group, and in the midst of this group there was someone inside that she didn't know.

“It’s a street performance!”

When she looked inside into the laughter and stared, she saw two small bear cub characters in the middle of a juggling act.

“Wow, wow, wow!”

Even Yumi who had not been at the top of spirits before, found herself unexpectedly excited. Sachiko-sama’s guard had taken a step back a while ago and was observing the pitiable Sachiko-sama.

Just realizing that it was humans who had performed this feat made her think “Incredible!” By wearing the character suit, they increased their joyfulness and cuteness by ten or maybe one hundred times.

After they had three boxes being juggled at once, while they were trying to keep the same box in the center, one of the bear cubs dropped a box, and whether that was an actual mistake or it was scripted, no-one knew. And because the act of picking up the box was so funny, she didn’t really care which it was.

“Hey, Onee-sama, that trick he just did there...”

As she kept looking, the crowds around the bear grew, and she gave her hand out to Sachiko-sama who was supposed to be next to her, but for some reason her hand felt nothingness.

“Onee...”

When she finally looked at where Onee-sama was supposed to have been, for some reason Onee-sama was squatting.

“O, Onee-sama?!”

When she saw the way her hair waved around and the white color of her cheeks, once glance was enough to show that she was sick.

“Onee-sama, what happened?”

Eventually, she touched Sachiko’s hand, and from Sachiko another hand blocked Yumi’s.

“Shh, Yumi-chan. It’ll be fine.”

“...Kashiwagi-san.”

“We’ll become an eyesore for everyone, so try not to make any noise and get out of the crowd through there.”

Of course, some people around her had already noticed and a slow set of whispers began of “Is she alright?” so an empty space formed around Sachiko-sama. But the bear cubs were still juggling with the utmost ferocity.

“Can you stand?”

Kashiwagi-san asked Sachiko-sama.

“But.”

She was feeling so bad that she had been squatting, and now being asked to stand. So when Yumi thought of that, she immediately let out a “but” from her mouth. Kashiwagi-san answered her words before she could speak, guessing her question.

“It’s better this way, even for Sacchan.”

Sachiko-sama’s head bobbed slightly up and down.

“I’m going to touch you a little bit, so please forgive me.”

Kashiwagi-san kept his silence not toward Sachiko-sama, but toward Yumi, and lifted Sachiko-sama by her shoulders and took her outside of the circle.

“Yumi.”

Yūki hurried them outside of the circle. Without so much as a “Sorry” or a “Thank you very much” to the people who had kept the path clear, Yumi kept her head down and seemed as if she would cry.

What the heck was I doing? She had felt good about being someone like Sachiko-sama’s mother.

If I were her mother, then I wouldn’t have gotten caught up in the bears’ juggling act, and would’ve noticed if my child had stopped speaking.

If I were her mother, I would’ve been able to keep calm and would have not reacted so loudly.

If I were her mother, the last thing I would do now is cry.

If I were her mother. If I were her ,other --. She kept going from one regret to the next self-hatred, and lobbed them into her heart.

“Hey, Yumi. Stop spacing out, and pay attention while walking.”

Yūki warned her. If she fell and got hurt now, she would be nothing other than an idiot.

He was right. She could always think back on what had happened later, an innumerable amount of times if necessary. To fall silent in the shock of seeing a person sick, and even becoming an eyesore. Why was I that type of person? Yumi actually cried. And her tears made her even more depressed.

“Here.”

Kashiwagi-san gestured with his hand. They were at the bench closest to the earlier crowds, and Sachiko-sama sat down.

“Yumi-chan, don’t cry. Sacchan is anemic, or maybe she just doesn’t like crowds. But basically, it happens in a split second. Hey, it’ll be fine!”

“I’m sorry, Yumi.”

Sachiko-sama lifted her head and smiled weakly, but the color in her face looked just as healthy as it had been before.

“It’s okay. Are you feeling better?”

Yumi answered, as she squatted diagonally away from the bench, and continuously wiped her tears away. She had heard Kashiwagi-san say “It’ll be fine”, but until she heard it from her Onee-sama’s mouth, she wouldn’t be at ease.

“Yeah. I’m sorry for making you worry, Yumi.”

“Thank god!”

She really looked okay.

“It really was what Suguru-san had said. While I was watching the juggling, I suddenly stood up, and then I just started squatting.”

“Even when she was younger, Sacchan would feel bad right before she would go out.”

Sachiko-sama nodded to Kashiwagi-san’s words.

“That’s right. I’ve grown up, but it still hasn’t gone away has it. I’m so depressed.”

So when Yumi heard that it was something that happened to Sachiko-sama a lot, when she heard that, she said, “I see”. When she understood that it wasn’t a frightening condition, her unease began to slowly lift.

“This was my plan.”

Kashiwagi-san said.

“So? Do you want to just wrap up for today, and do this some other day?”

“No I think we’ve done quite enough.”

So please don’t worry about me, is what Sachiko-sama had meant. But Kashiwagi-san refused.

“No, not for me. For all three of us. If we tried to have more fun after this, then we wouldn’t be able to enjoy ourselves because of our worry for you. The amusement park won’t run away. We can come again.”

Sachiko-sama sat silently. He had even said “No, not for me.” There was no way to add any “but”s after that.

“And you two?”

Kashiwagi-san sought the opinion of the two, and Yumi and Yūki nodded.

When Kashiwagi-san had asked earlier and even though it was Kashiwagi-san who had made the plan, and even though she would have to become an ally of Kashiwagi-san, and even though all of her sensibilities rebelled from this, Yumi still agreed with his “just wrap up for today” idea.

Because Onee-sama’s body was the most important thing here; she didn’t want to wish for impossible things. Aah, why hadn’t she said “Let’s go back” faster, Yumi regretted.

“Three-against-one. It’s decided then.” As Yumi walked slowly to protect Sachiko-sama’s hand, Yumi was attacked by a feeling of defeat.

Kashiwagi-san lifted Sachiko-sama’s shoulder bag, and pulled it off her shoulder.

“Ah, I can.”

He once again went to the front, and suddenly pushed it out.

“Yumi-chan, here.”

Kashiwagi-san had dropped Sachiko-sama’s hand to Yumi.

“Don’t drop it, and hold on to it tight.”

(He really was a snob! Snob, snob, snob!)

Onee-sama’s hand was just a little cold.

Of course, Sachiko-sama wasn’t holding onto Kashiwagi-san’s hand but her hand. But that would mean she were equal, and not thought of by Sachiko-sama as having earned the title of the best.

Plus if Kashiwagi-san was the type of person who wanted to hold onto Sachiko-sama, then from the start he could have. Were he a worse type of person, then.

The four of them backtracked from the main street on this high-tension morning, and walked toward the exit. Sachiko-sama once looked back longingly, but Yumi did not. She didn't want to feel as if she had any lingering excitement for the park.

"Wait here. My parking space is a bit far, so I'll go by myself to the car and bring it here."

Kashiwagi-san said, and went off alone.

(Ahh, I see.)

The answer to "Why had Kashiwagi-san come here?" had come, and even what he had meant by "guard". And when he had said that he hoped he would not come to use.

He had a hunch that Sachiko-sama might falter. Then she would have to come home by train, while sick, which would feel lousy, so Kashiwagi-san had prepared the car.

Within ten minutes, the highly memorable loud red car appeared in front of the three. Yumi opened the rear seats, and ushered Sachiko-sama in.

"Sempai."

Yūki asked Kashiwagi-san who had sat in the driver's seat.

"You two, hop in."

Right, Yumi? Yūki confirmed. The truth was that she had wanted to be next to her Onee-sama for the whole trip, but Yumi nodded.

"Why aren't you two coming?"

"It's not that we don't want to come. If you can get Sachiko-sama back home just an instant faster, then great. If we came along, then even if you dropped us off at a train station, then you'd lose some time."

At times, Yumi was surprised at how thoroughly Yūki thought things through.

"Right now, Sachiko-san's health is the most important thing."

Kashiwagi-san made a contemplating-sort of face, but eventually replied seriously.

“Understood. Then, you two come along to the Ogasawara-house for a short time.”

“Huh?”

“Right now, Sacchan wants to be next to Yumi.”

If you did think hard about Sacchan, then yes definitely. With this, the Fukuzawa siblings got up into the gaudy car. Looking at Yumi who was sitting in the next seat, Sachiko-sama narrowed her eyes and said “Thank you”.

The crimson car immediately set off from the amusement park’s parking lot.

A Mille-Feuille of Sighs

Part 1.

Sachiko-sama slept underneath a blanket that covered her from her neck below.

Around the time they entered the normal roads, Sachiko-sama had rested her head on Yumi's shoulders, held Yumi's hand in hers, and said "Stay here", and then began breathing as if asleep.

"You know, Sacchan is bad with large crowds. Well, I think you didn't know that."

While gripping the handle, Kashiwagi-san spoke, turning whether to Yuki in the passenger seat or Yumi in the rear seat she didn't know. Kashiwagi-san's driving was gentle; trying might be doing.

"She doesn't seem like that, does she? Well, she is bad with crowds, so she can't get over it, but it seems... How would you say it... A bit deceiving."

"Kashiwagi-san."

Yumi began to speak.

"If you knew this would happen to her beforehand, why didn't you stop her?"

He knew Sachiko-sama so well. Yet watching from behind until she hurt herself; she just couldn't understand Kashiwagi-san's actions.

"It's because Sacchan seemed incredibly happy."

As the sun began moving toward the West, Kashiwagi-san took his left hand off the steering wheel, and lowered his rear-view mirror.

"She seemed happy. Really. Before she left, and even after she reached here. I've never seen Sacchan smile so much. Asking her if she'd be alright or reminding her that she'd become sick would be a bit low, wouldn't it?"

"But."

"Knowing beforehand doesn't always mean you can do something like that. She had made plans on her own, and completely excluded me, there was no other choice."

“...I still don’t see why.”

“Sacchan wants to do a lot of things with you, Yumi-chan. I just felt a bit cruel by trying to stop her.”

After that, no one really talked. While Yumi held onto Sachiko-sama’s blanket on her shoulder, she looked out the window at the rolling scenery.”

She had wanted to do so many things, and so she had thought things that she could do, but she couldn’t actually do any of them.

Sometimes, the answers are right in front of your eyes, but you just can’t grasp them.

Kashiwagi-san’s words would occasionally resonate with her. She needed to pay full attention to this problem. But no matter, Yumi just couldn’t understand it.

Eventually, Yūki who had been sitting in the passenger seat, began making meaningless conversation with Kashiwagi-san. She heard familiar names like “Alice” or “Nikkou and Gakkou”, but she felt deflated.

Until they reached home, Sachiko-sama never let go of Yumi’s hand.

Part 2.

The car entered through the Ogasawara-gates, but before it stopped at the parking lot, **Sayako Oba-sama** came out of the entrance and went to meet the four.

“Ahh, Sachiko-san!”

The outside had already become pitch-black, and only Oba-sama’s apron seemed unkempt.

“I’m sorry, Oba-sama.”

Yumi helped Sachiko-sama down, whom she had held hands with a minute ago, and gave her to Sayako Oba-sama.

“Yumi-chan, don’t be. I’m the one who should be apologizing. I heard what had happened from Suguru-san by phone. I’m sorry for just cutting your date short like that. For now, why doesn’t everyone come inside and sip some hot tea?”

Sayako Oba-sama ushered everyone in, promising to greet everyone later. Yūki, who had nothing to do after Sachiko-sama was delivered safely, began mopping up his hair.

“Oba-sama, were you cooking something?”

Yumi asked as she began walking down the corridor. Oba-sama was wearing an apron, and her sweater and hair were dusted with white powder.

“You noticed? I just suddenly felt like baking something.”

Sayako Oba-sama answered in a lilting voice.

“Baking?”

“Yep.”

The three guests looked at each other as they nodded.

“Hey, what’s with those faces? You don’t think that I was off having fun baking cakes while my daughter was sick?”

Oba-sama’s voice was terse. Or it seemed that way to Yumi.

“Of course not. You had started before noon right? Sachiko-san’s condition suddenly worsened halfway through, so there was little you could have done today.”

“Why did you suddenly want to bake today?”

Sachiko-sama asked from the reception room, where she was sitting underneath the blanked that Kashiwagi-san had put on top of her in the car. Everyone had told her to rest in her room, but she had wanted to be with her friends, so she had tagged along.

“Your father yesterday, you know, brought back the most beautiful fallen leaves. Seeing that, I just wanted to make something.”

Oba-sama confessed, as the maid servant handed the tea out.

“Ah, fallen leaves.”

“Of course.”

Sachiko-sama and Kashiwagi-san had understood something interesting, but the Fukuzawa twins couldn’t understand how baking came from fallen leaves. Then, Oba-sama began explaining exactly what she had meant.

“Mille-Feuille is a pastry that means ‘one-thousand leaves’ does it not?”

Ah, that’s true.

“That’s surprising.”

“But true. It’s what you think of when you think of falling leaves, right?”

While Sayako Oba-sama painted the elegant scene in their minds, Yumi remembered something as she saw how happy Oba-sama was with Tooru Oji-sama bringing in fallen leaves.

“Well then. It might be a bit rude but, why don’t I serve some of the Mille-Feuille.”

Sayako Oba-sama distributed the cups of Mille-Feuille to everyone and then stood. Sachiko-sama then called out to Sayako Oba-sama.

“Mother, please don’t tell father or grandfather that I felt sick and had to come home.”

“I won’t say anything, but they’ll eventually find out.”

Oba-sama answered and turned toward the door.

“But won’t you stay silent about the whole thing?”

“I won’t say anything, but they’ll definitely hear about it. I asked Iwamatsu-sensei for a house call, and grandfather and Iwamatsu-sensei are Go friends.”

Just from listening to the conversation, it seemed that Iwamatsu-sensei was an intimate doctor for the Ogasawara family, and was good friends with Sachiko-sama’s grandfather with whom he played Go.

“Huh, you called sensei?”

“Of course I did. I didn’t know how you were feeling on the phone you know.”

Sayako Oba-sama replied, and after looked over her daughter and mumbled “hmmm”.

“Well you seem better already. Let me call up Sensei and tell him not to come.”

As soon as Sayako Oba-sama stood up, the bell indicating visitors rang.

“I guess I was too late huh.”

Sayako Oba-sama looked at Sachiko-sama.

“There’s nothing we can do. Sachiko-san, please go to your room, and at least let Sensei look at you.”

“Huh?”

“Well I can’t just send him home saying that I called him for no reason.”

Sayako Oba-sama told Sachiko-sama that after Sensei was done, she could come back to the reception room.

“Well, Suguru-san, I’m sorry but please entertain Yumi-chan and Yūki-san.”

As soon as Sayako Oba-sama and Sachiko-sama opened the door of the reception room, Yūki stood up with them.

“Uh, could I use your phone please? I want to call home.”

“Of course. Once you exit the room, keep to your left side, until you see a small room. Use the phone there. Should I get the receiver from that room and bring it here?”

“Uh, no, that’s fine. I’ll go.”

Yūki said, and then slipped outside of the door that Sayako Oba-sama had left open.

“What about using my cell phone?”

Yumi’s little brother turned down Kashiwagi-san’s request.

“I have to go to the bathroom after that.”

“Well then hurry.”

Would he really go after, or was the main thing the bathroom. When Yumi saw him hurry out, she thought she knew.

When three people in a previously five person occupied room leave, the feel of the room changes. Plus, the only other person remaining was Kashiwagi-san. They had ridden together on the roller coaster, but there had been so many people they had not known around them, so it hadn’t really felt like they had been ‘together’.

Silence.

So deep was the silence that the sound of the air conditioner could be heard.

Kashiwagi-san, just as societal protocol dictated, moved himself in the seat in front of Yumi.

“It’s just the two of us, isn’t it.”

“What?!”

“Is not what I’m thinking, but you, right Yumi-chan?”

(...)

He had teased her perfectly. To counter his offensive move, Yumi said one of the top-five things swirling around inside her heart.

“Know-it-all.”

“But I’m not. It’s not like I think Yumi-chan has any feelings for me. I just thought you wanted to talk a bit with me, but was I wrong?”

Why does he have to reply with something like that. He understands, and yet why does he make me react like this.

“I hate you, Kashiwagi-san.”

“That’s fine.”

“How can you just say that?”

“Yumi-chan seems like the person who won’t tell someone anything if she doesn’t have any thoughts about them. But if you say something like this to me, even if it’s about a feeling of fear or hatred, at least it means you have some strong feelings for me. That makes me very happy. Not thinking anything at all about me would be much more painful.”

Kashiwagi-san curled his index finger above his thigh as he laughed. Did he actually mean what he had just said?

“I’m jealous of you Kashiwagi-san, I think. A bit.”

“I know that. You like Sacchan. I understand that to you I’m an eyesore.”

Kashiwagi-san had nothing more or nothing less to say, no other meanings to imply. He had spoken plain truth.

Yumi obviously liked Sachiko-sama.

Then.

“Kashiwagi-san, you like Sachiko-sama don’t you?”

“I do.”

Kashiwagi-san could have taken some more time to think, but he replied instantly.

“Then why did you tell Sachiko-sama that?”

“That?”

“That you’re gay.”

When Yumi said those words, Kashiwagi-san’s normally self-confident, youthful figure faltered for just a moment.

“...My god. Just how much do you know.”

Kashiwagi-san uncoiled his index finger, straightened his hair, and let out a large sigh. Yumi probably should not have said what Sachiko-sama had told her about this earlier. But it was too late. She couldn't take back something she had already done.

"We can marry, but we can't have kids, so Sachiko-sama can have kids with someone of her choice. You told her that, didn't you?"

"Sacchan told you so much, did she."

Kashiwagi-san's mood changed, as he traced a line around his body. Kashiwagi-san made a pained face as his curtain was unveiled, and in the darkness that followed Yumi shone.

"But that's a lie isn't it? Kashiwagi-san really loves Sachiko-sama, doesn't he? I can see it. But still Kashiwagi-san, you."

"Kashiwagi-san you.?"

Is what, he asked frankly. At that moment, Yumi understood.

"You said that to stop Sachiko-sama from marrying you."

"Did I?"

An answer was unnecessary. Kashiwagi's eyes said "correct".
But why did he--.

"There's some parts of me that even you can't see."

"Huh?"

Just what did he mean by parts that you can see and parts that you couldn't see? But these were the parts of Kashiwagi-san that she could see, so she knew that nothing could change the truth that Kashiwagi-san liked Sachiko-sama.

"Of course I like Sacchan. If you ask me whether I love Sacchan, I'll say yes to even that. But there are many forms of liking."

"Many forms?"

"You like Sacchan, but you also like Yūki. And of course, you like yourself Yumi-chan."

Kashiwagi-san was talking about complicated things.

"But you like Sachiko-sama the most don't you?"

“What do you mean by the most? I like my dog. I like Maple Parlor’s jelly. I like Kendo. I like cars. Is that something I can’t do? There’s no way I can weigh these likes on one scale.”

“But I mean, as a person.”

Dogs and jellies were different types, and it’s hard to compare forms of “like”, but she meant the kind between one person and another.

“Yumi-chan, you like your father and your mother, don’t you?”

“Huh?”

“And Yūki too? Sacchan? Can you decide which one you like the most?”

Of course there was no way she could. Because Dad was Dad, Mom was Mom, and Mom and Dad were different people. Dad and Yūki were the same. It was the same throughout her family. There was no way she could even mix Sachiko-sama amongst them.

(Ah.)

Maybe that’s what Kashiwagi-san had meant by “many kinds”. Just by a bit, just by a tiny bit, she felt she understood.

“I like Sacchan. But I don’t want to marry her. Because you’re Yumi-chan I’ll tell you but, that’s the way I really feel.”

“Kashiwagi-san, you really wouldn’t marry Sachiko-sama? So then, you don’t want to marry anyone?”

“If it were Yumi-chan, could I?”

“I’m sorry but, I can’t laugh at such jokes.”

“Understood. I’ll stop.”

Kashiwagi-san raised his hands up to shoulder height and laughed.

“One last thing. You can’t win by defeating me.”

“What the heck does that--”

“You still feel jealous of me. If you don’t stop now, it’ll only get worse.”

“...”

“Don’t look at me like that. I can’t give you any more hints.”

Kashiwagi brought his legs and arms together, sunk deep into the sofa, and closed his eyes. Anything else, Yumi had to figure out by herself. She got the feeling that she would have no more access.

“If you aren’t an enemy, then what are you?”

Yumi uselessly tried to gain access, and Kashiwagi-san’s eyes opened very slightly.

“A friend.”

Kashiwagi-san said and when he closed his eyes, Yūki had come back inside the Reception Room.

“Yumi. I called mom and dad. Then I heard that Sachiko-san wanted you to come to her room but... What happened?”

“Nothing.”

Yumi stood, and tightly grasped the topmost button on the blouse she wore below her sweater.

“Yumi?”

“It’s nothing. I’ll go to Sachiko-sama’s room now.”

Yūki understood well when something felt amiss, so he didn’t pay much attention to his sister’s attitude. But he didn’t want to get dragged into something.

Kashiwagi-san hadn’t done anything wrong.

But right now, he didn’t want to be inside. He didn’t want Kashiwagi-san to see his face.

As soon as Yumi closed the door with her lagging hand, Yūki indeed asked Kashiwagi-san “Did something happen?”

Kashiwagi-san replied coolly to an inflamed Yūki.

“We were just playing a game.”

And as soon as Yumi left the corridor, Yūki balled up his fist and launched it into Kashiwagi-san’s chest.

Part 3.

As Yumi was walking toward Sachiko-sama's room, she met with the doctor in the corridor.

"There's nothing wrong here, but if you could, could you please keep the talk light and let her rest? She seems tired."

He roughly patted Yumi's shoulder like an old man does. Because he wasn't in his white robes, at first, she hadn't recognized him for the doctor. For a moment, she thought that Sachiko-sama's grandfather had come home, but this man was too young to be Tooru Ojii-san's father.

When she looked at her watch, she realized that it was almost seven o'clock, but neither Sachiko-sama's father nor grandfather had returned home yet. It was around the holidays, and around now the heads of the company would be late working with all their appointments.

"Thank you very much."

Yumi saw off the doctor at the entrance with Sayako Obasama, and then went to visit Sachiko-sama's room. She had bothered her Onee-sama before, who lived on the house's second floor, so she could get there without any help.

Yumi knocked then entered.

"Yumi."

Onee-sama had changed completely into her nightclothes, and was sitting patiently on top of the bed.

"I was planning to go back to the Reception Room."

"It's fine. You should sleep."

Yumi pushed over the futon that had been against the wall, and sat next to Sachiko-sama's bed.

Right now, Sachiko-sama was in arm's reach.

When she was talking with Kashiwagi-san, it had felt almost as if Sachiko-sama had become this distant person.

But she was here.

Right now, she forgot about her hard homework, and basked in the happiness of being together with her Onee-sama.

“What happened?”

Sachiko-sama ran her hand through Yumi’s hair.

“I was jealous of Kashiwagi-san today.”

Yumi replied, as Sachiko-sama stroked Yumi’s hair.

“Ahh.”

“Because, the things I wanted to do but couldn’t, he did easily. Because he knows so much about Onee-sama that I don’t know.”

Plus he was an adult. She didn’t want to admit it but, there were a lot of things he was that she couldn’t be.

Even if she thought of their relationship as one of friendship as Kashiwagi-san had said, he was still far ahead of her. From that distance, he would occasionally turn back and laugh at the lagging Yumi.

“Silly.”

But Onee-sama laughed as she talked.

“But there are things that Yumi can do and Suguru-san can’t. Such as.”

“Such as...?”

Dozens of things spiraled in her mind, and Yumi’s clouded mind wanted to know the truth. Could it be possible for so sorry an existence to win against Kashiwagi-san?

“Right now, it was Yumi’s smile that I wanted to see. While I was riding in the car, I wanted to hold Yumi’s hand. Not Suguru-san’s. That’s not bad, is it?”

“Not bad...”

Yumi shook her head vigorously.

Plus, Sachiko-sama continued.

“Yumi always gives me strength.”

“Onee-sama.”

She really was cheering Yumi on.

Heeding the doctor's words, Yumi got up and said "Well, I'll leave for today". But Sachiko-sama replied.

"Yumi. I'm sorry for today. We'll surely get our revenge."

"Onee-sama. Don't get heated about revenge. Next time we go, use some of my strength. Even if you feel sick, it'll be fine. Once, or even twice, don't stop asking me for help."

Yumi bent over and touched Onee-sama's hand.

"That's true. We did go a long way, and it was a long-postponed amusement park trip. I might have gone a little too far today, really."

"Yeah."

"Now that I think about it, I realize what they mean by 'It's good to fail sometimes'. Yumi, this is what they mean, right?"

Yumi nodded, and flipped the switch next to Sachiko-sama's bed.

"It really is."

Sachiko-sama's words, together with the fading light, danced around in the room's darkness.



Part 4.

When Yumi returned to the Reception Room, Yūki said “Let’s go”.

“You don’t have to hurry like that. I prepared some Mille-Feuille, and you should eat some dinner now.”

“No, I already called up our mother telling her that we’d eat at home.”

Yūki bowed his head in apology.

“Oh...”

Oba-sama whispered in disappointment.

“Your mother must have prepared the dinner already and is waiting on you two. So now, I shouldn’t hold you two here unnecessarily. But could you two wait just a bit here?”

Oba-sama dashed out of the room, and Kashiwagi-san, who had been sitting on the sofa, shrugged his head and pushed off the blanket from over his head.

“I’ll take you two home.”

But Yūki refused.

“No. There are still trains and buses running.”

Kashiwagi-san folded his arms together and glared coldly at Yūki.

“Then you do that. But I’ll take Yumi-chan back in my car.”

“What the heck?”

“After getting Sacchan’s little sister involved in all of this, I hadn’t just mouthed my promise to drive her home. Even if I don’t take her, I’ll send her back with an Ogasawara driver. Would that make you feel better?”

“...”

Yūki stayed silent. But it seemed as if they would have to go home in someone’s car. To make sure the matter wouldn’t blow out of proportion, Yumi spoke.

“Kashiwagi-san, could you take us?”

“Yumi.”

“It’s fine if Kashiwagi-san takes me. I’ll go back with him. And hey, Yūki, you too. Because if we come home by different rides, it’ll seem weird.”

To which Yūki replied dejectedly.

“It’s Yumi who’s weird.”

It seemed as if he was angry at something.

“Doesn’t Yumi hate sempai?”

“Eh?”

Yūki didn’t just seem angry, he was angry. He was really angry. Maybe he had mistook what he thought could have happened while his older sister and Kashiwagi-san had been together.

“Yukichi. You’ve said enough in front of her.”

Kashiwagi-san smiled bitterly, then began patting Yūki from behind, and Yumi wondered whether she had understood what was going on.

“Well it’s not like anything really bad happened.”

Yumi touched Yūki’s shoulder and said “Hey”. It did not visibly calm Yūki down, but he did coolly accept going in Kashiwagi-san’s car.

“So, it’s final then. Yumi-chan, put something over yourself please.”

Kashiwagi-san brought Yumi her jacket and spread it open behind Yumi, as a gentleman should, making it easy to wear. He waited for Yumi to put it on, but Yumi didn’t move her hands. She just simply waited for the jacket to be put on her.

For some reason, she didn’t want to touch Kashiwagi-san. Sayako Oba-sama, who had told the two to wait, came back within five minutes. In her hands, she was carrying a large box that seemed as if it contained a hall-full of cake.

“Well then, take this as a gift.”

“Uh, um well.”

Sayako Oba-sama spoke through Yumi’s confusion.

“Mille-Feuille. Eat it with your parents.”

“This much?”

She really had divided it into large portions. Would this kind of cutting up leave nothing left for Tooru Ojii-sama?

“Don’t worry. We still have four times this much left.”

“Eh...”

For that matter, Oba-sama’s home cooking was known to be extreme.

If she wanted to eat bread in the morning, she would first measure the amount of flour she would need. She would make food for a snack on a day trip, but somehow it would become dinner. So while making the Mille-Feuille, this extremity manifested itself in the amount she had prepared.

“Oba-sama, please make sure I have some too. After I drop off the Fukusawa kids, I’ll come back here.”

“Well, Kashiwagi-san, you’ll be coming back?”

“Yeah. Today was.”

Kashiwagi-san made sure to let her know that he would be coming back, and shook his head and said “I’ll be coming back later so.”

“I see. Take care of Yumi-chan for me.”

Sayako Oba-sama gave Kashiwagi-san a similar type of box, and beamed with the satisfaction of having baked it.

The outside had become incredibly cold.

“Well then, I’ll see you later.”

Yumi’s cheeks, which jutted out from above the jacket, fed in the outside cold, and rose in farewell to Sayako Oba-sama.

As Kashiwagi-san revved his red car’s engine in the parking lot to heat up the area, Yumi and Yūki waited. This time, Yūki didn’t seat in the front passenger’s seat, but instead sank into the rear seats next to Yumi. This was where Sachiko-sama had been sitting. The blanket that Sachiko-sama had been wearing was now in the passenger’s seat.

Kashiwagi-san’s driving was only a bit more aggressive than earlier.

As the car wound left and right, the Mille-Feuille made sounds as it jostled around inside its box.

“Please drive a bit more carefully.”

As usual, Yūki’s mood would not improve.

“Yukichi, you’re annoying. You really are meant for Tōko, aren’t you?”

“Tōko-chan?”

Yumi asked again. She was Kashiwagi-san’s cousin, but Yumi felt as if she had heard the name for the first time today.

“Yep. First it was Tōko who had invited him, but then Yukichi stood her up and invited her again.”

“...I’m just the stunt boy aren’t I.”

Yūki had really gotten angry. But Yumi had no energy left to try to placate her little brother.

Outside the window, the streetlights and the lights from the convenience stores reflected in her eyes. As she spaced out, words echoed in her mind.

Mille-Feuille. Yu, Yumi. Mi, Mille-Feuille. Yu, Yumi.

She was playing Shiritori with herself, but like a broken record, she kept saying the same thing over and over again.

The game continued to repeat, until it became a continuous stream of thought, and at some point, she sighed and felt that perhaps the large Mille-Feuille was just too big.

Afterword

The day I finished the draft of the book, I had a listless feeling of wanting to eat Mille-Feuille.

I just ambled down the stairs aimlessly, and went to my kitchen, and what were the first words that leapt up to me? None other than “Mille-Feuille”.

“Oh, you can read my mind eh?”

It was indeed a mind-reading.

It was the name of a pastry my mother would buy from the supermarket.

The one I wanted to eat was quite different.

But I ate it.

It was much tastier than I thought it would be... Even though it was something else.

Hi. Konno here.

Just as the introduction (the thing that starts with “Gokigenyou” “Gokigenyou”, you know) said, this is a three-parter. Part Rosa Foetida family, part Rosa Gigantea family, and part Rosa Chinensis family, in that order. If you look at it, each has a separate story.

If you take those three creations, bake them in a pie, and add some cream on top, then the result looks something like Mille-Feuille doesn’t it? And when I thought of that, I came up with the subtitle.

But then if it were a sandwich, how would American Sandwich be? Well I didn’t want to really use something like that.

The sound of Mille-Feuille is cute, and it looks nice too. Done.

Let’s try to change it, shall we?

“A Rose Sandwich.”

Which isn’t bad, but it sounds like we’re going to go to a picnic.

“A Rose American Sandwich.”

Just why did I think of this again?

But if you call this entire book the Mille-Feuille, then would you call the stories pies or cream? Well, if you had to pick one, it would probably be pies. Yes pies.

Well then. This three-part story wasn't really composed of three separate volumes, because each of them had some common parts weaved into them. Like "pastry", "car", or "man". There might still be some more, but please look them up in your free time. You might even show me some, but I won't add any more to the list. (By the way, there are several ones that I forgot to write in the above list anyway.)

Stories that unfold outside of a school, and which between them have one common, shared point.

There are readers who would like to investigate the places that the girls went on [on their dates]. Give it up though, because you don't know how long they had spent there or how much.

The hotel, amusement park, and even the kindergarten (thankfully no-one really knows where the kindergarten is) aren't real. The reason behind this is simple. When I was writing, I hadn't gathered any information on any one real place! (I had done the same thing with other places too, but.)

Basically, I pick whichever places I think will work well for the story. That's why, even if you try very hard to find out what these places are, I'll still forgive you.

I wanted to quote Yoshino's battle lines, but I only remembered two quotations "Hereditary Warfare" and "Glorifying actions --"

In particular, it was the mountain associated with these glorifying actions that inspired Yoshino's line. The inspiration [from Fuurin Kazan] itself came from mixing a fast "wind" and an aggressive "fire". I rejected the prospect of adding in a quiet "forest", for obvious reasons. (Heh).

Today, when I was opening the door for my home refrigerator, I discovered the ice cream (actually ice milk) that called itself “Mille-Feuille”.

“Is Mille-Feuille some Japanese fad?”

Or was it just a fad in her home (or more likely just in her mother).

When I was writing this Afterword, my mother still hadn’t found out what the subtitle going to be.

-- Konno Oyuki